THE GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E.

MAGAZINE

DECEMBER 50c PDC

Introducing

Two New U.N.C.L.E. Agents

starring

APRIL DANCER

"An Armful of Dark-Haired Danger"

and co-starring

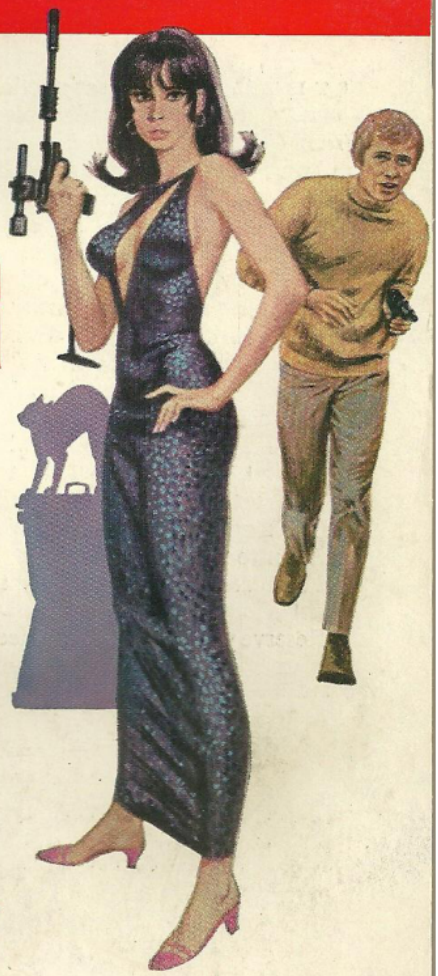
MARK SLATE

"The Agent Whose Business is Death"

in

THE SHEIK OF ARABY AFFAIR

A Complete Novel of Desert Terror



They follow in the famous footsteps of:

NAPOLEON SOLO

ILLYA KURYAKIN

ALEXANDER WAVERLY

The Sheik of Araby Affair

Number I of *The Girl From U.N.C.L.E.*

Robert Hart Davis

Tags:Grizli777

The Sheik of Araby Affair

By ROBERT HART DAVIS

Deep in the trackless desert THRUSH had forged a weapon of unthinkable deadliness, as April Dancer faced a ring of foes to rescue Mark Slate and bring back to U.N.C.L.E. her deadly secret.

ONE

A PENNY SAVED

British men, being more reserved than Americans, don't stare as openly at attractive women under ordinary circumstances. Yet every male head at the race track turned in the wake of the girl as she passed by.

She was a slim girl in her early twenties, perhaps five feet five inches tall and a pound or two less than a hundred and ten. Although this left her a bit on the willowy side, her small weight couldn't have been distributed more delightfully. Dark hair falling to her shoulders framed a lovely, delicately featured face with vivacious flashing wide eyes.

But there was more.

It wasn't only her beauty that turned heads, however. It was also her dress.

Not that it was in any way striking. As a matter of fact her neat blue sport suit was smartly conservative both in color and design. But Englishmen, particularly those affluent enough to occupy the private box section of a race track, tend not only to notice women's clothes, but to be excellent judges of their quality.

It was apparent to the more discerning men that the simple sport suit was an Italian original which couldn't have cost less than fifteen hundred dollars. They also noted that she wore no jewelry whatever except an attractive but inexpensive charm bracelet.

The woman was obviously American, and English experience had been that moderately wealthy American women cover themselves with gems in order to flaunt their wealth.

English connoisseurs of such matters had also noted that the enormously wealthy, feeling less compulsion to impress others, often wore little jewelry or none at all.

The woman therefore was an American heiress. And, since she wore neither wedding band nor engagement ring, apparently available.

Approximately every second male head which turned as she passed was considering ways which might be arranged to meet her.

Two of the men eyeing her sat in a private box directly in the line of her approach. One was a tall dark man in his mid-thirties with an athletic build, wearing a conservative dark suit and an old school tie which would have told the initiated that he was a graduate of Oxford

University's Balliol College.

He had a lean, intelligent face with liquid brown eyes and a slightly aquiline nose. A thin black mustache and a small, close-trimmed black goatee gave him the appearance of a handsome Mephistopheles.

The other man was short and squat, with powerful shoulders and bandy legs. His slightly oversized head had thick, Slavic features and moist, pendulous lips. He was somewhere in his mid-forties.

"Do you know who she is, Maxim?" the younger man asked.

"Never saw her before."

"She is checking box numbers," the Mephistophelean man said. "Do you suppose we could be lucky enough to have her looking for us?"

"I hope not," his companion said definitely. "Playing companion to you on this ridiculous jaunt is degrading enough without having to disentangle you from some female."

"Ridiculous jaunt?" the younger man said with raised brows. "I've been training Salome for this race for over a year. And I really don't require a companion."

"'A matter of opinion," the squat man said dourly. "To insist on taking time out for this nonsense in the middle of the most important project the organization has ever undertaken hardly impresses me as responsible action. With your knowledge of the project, I wouldn't turn you loose among strangers for a triple promotion."

I'm glad you came along," the tall man said with a grin. "You're so suspicious of everybody we meet and so refreshingly incapable of enjoying anything but work."

Then his face lighted. "I do believe the lady is looking for us. She is heading this way.

The girl stopped before the box, examined its number, then looked up with a dazzling smile.

"Sheik Ranjit Sighn?" she inquired in a musical voice, glancing from one man to the other as though she didn't know which to address.

The younger man rose and bowed. "At your service, sultana. My poor sword is yours to command."

The squat man rose also, reluctantly. The girl ignored him, too intrigued by the romantic statement uttered in an Oxford accent. Oddly the words hadn't sounded corny, although from the twinkle in the sheik's eyes she wasn't sure whether he was sincere or merely teasing. She decided he was teasing and replied in kind. "I'm sorry I don't have any dragons to slay today. Salome's handler told me your box number. I know this is impertinent, but is Salome going to win?"

"The sheik's horses usually win," the other man said in a guttural

Slavic accent. “He devotes most of his time to training them.”

His tone was slightly peevish, as though he considered his companion’s devotion to horse training a waste of time.

After a flick of a glance in the squat man’s direction, the girl returned her attention to the sheik, her eyes questioning.

He exposed white teeth in a smile. “No one can guarantee a win, sultana. But I always race my horses to win. No jockey of mine ever holds a horse back to build up the odds for future races.”

“But do you think she will win?” she persisted. “I want to make a bet, you see.”

The sheik laughed with delighted amusement. “I wouldn’t give a bad tip to such a charming lady. Salome can out distance anything she’s against today. Barring unforeseen accidents, such as her breaking a leg, you may bet her with confidence.”

“Oh, thanks,” the girl said, and started to turn away.

“A moment, please,” the sheik said.

Pausing, she glanced up inquiringly.

“You can’t move into a man’s life, then out again without even telling who you are,” he said. “I would never again sleep.”

“Oh, I’m April Dancer,” she said airily, and started to walk away again.

“Wait!”

She paused a second time, this time frowning.

“Won’t you join us and watch the race from our box?”

“Thank you,” she said politely.

“But I have to find my bookie to get a bet down. And he’s clear over near the box of the people I’m with.”

“You may use my bookie,” he said. “It will be simple to arrange.”

When she pursed her lips undecidedly, the sheik said, “We would be delighted to have you. And I may be able to give you tips on other races.”

April’s eyes lighted.

“All right,” she said. “I love to win.”

The sheik gallantly descended the short steps leading from the box to take her hand and personally escort her up them. He introduced his friend as Maxim Karsh.

The squat man dourly said he was charmed, but he didn’t sound it.

When they were settled in seats, April between the two men, Sheik Ranjit Sighn motioned over a portly man in a bowler who was standing nearby.

“This is Miss April Dancer, Basher,” he said. “Put the name on your books and cover any amount she wants to bet.”

“Sure, guv’nor, your ‘ighness,” the bookie said. “What’s your liking, Miss?”

"Oh, Salome, of course."

Basher made a notation. "'Ow much, and what position do you favor?"

"Just a moment," April Dancer said.

Opening the alligator bag she carried, which both men could see was loaded with currency, she took out a piece of paper bearing a column of figures and studied it.

"Let's see," she said, speaking aloud to herself. "I'm ten shillings six pence ahead. If I dropped the ten shillings, I would still be six pence up.

To the bookie she said, "A half pound on second place."

"Second!" the sheik said with a mixture of amusement and indignation.

April hiked her eyebrows at him.

"I don't want to risk losing," she said.

The sheik laughed aloud, as one laughs at the cute exploit of a small child. "Put it down, Basher. And a thousand for me on the nose. You want to place a bet, Maxim?"

"You know I don't gamble," Maxim Karsh answered.

The horses were led from the paddock and began parading up and down. The sheik said, "Salome is number two"

"I know," April said. "Isn't she beautiful?"

Ranjit Sighn swelled like a new father whose baby daughter has just been complimented.

"I'm rather proud of her," he admitted.

"I love horse racing," the girl confided. "I almost always win."

"l can imagine," the sheik said with dry amusement.

"We do it differently in America, you know. We have betting windows. There are no bookies at the track."

"I know," the sheik said."I've been to America."

"Oh? Sorry I can't return the compliment. I've never been to Arabia."

"I'm not from Arabia," Ranjit said. "I happen to be the Sheik of Mossagbah."

"Oh?" April said blankly.

The, sheik's expression turned rueful. "Few Americans seem to be aware that my country is on the map. It's on the edge of the Arabian Desert. It's not large; but it's rich in oil and equally rich in beauty. Nothing is more beautiful than the desert."

"I would like to visit it someday, "the girl said politely.

"I would be glad to arrange it now," the sheik said.

She smiled at him. "I'm afraid I have to return to the States next week. How do I address you, incidentally? Sheik? Your highness? Or guv'nor, like Basher?"

“Ranjit,” the sheik said.

“Then you may call me April. Oh, look, it’s post time. “

Conversation ceased until the race was over. It is not the custom in England to shout for your horse at race tracks, but April got carried away as the horses entered the stretch and yelled Salome home. It wasn’t until Salome crossed the finish line first, that April glanced around and saw people staring her way and she realized her breach of etiquette.

Putting her hand to her mouth, she abruptly sat down and gave the sheik an abashed look.

“I embarrassed you,” she said. “You delighted me,” he assured her.“The English could enjoy life more with a little American type enthusiasm.”

Salome had been the favorite. When the results were posted, April discovered that the odds had been so low, she had increased her winnings only by three shillings sixpence. But she exhibited no disappointment. As a matter of fact she seemed eminently satisfied.

It wasn’t the amount you won that was important, she explained to the sheik. The important thing was to win.

The comment further amused Ranjit Sighn. If there had been any doubt in his mind that April Dancer was actually an American heiress, her performance dispelled any uncertainty. It had been his experience that only very rich Americans showed concern over small amounts of money.

Probably the value of money had been drilled into her since childhood, he thought. This was a peculiarity of American millionaires.

A penny saved was a penny earned. He had once read that the children of old John. D. Rockefeller were allowed a spending allowance of fifty cents a week until they reached their teens.

TWO

THE SILENT LISTENER

Under the indulgent tutelage of the sheik, April made equally frugal and successful bets on the remaining races. By the end of the last race she was two pounds eight pence ahead and was obviously delighted by her winnings.

The sheik was equally delighted, but in a different way. Between races he had worked considerable personal information from the girl, and was now convinced beyond all doubt that she was a multimillionairess. She had told him she was an orphan and had been the only child of a freezer manufacturer in Akron, Ohio.

A casual mention that her father had died in the very three-hundred-bed hospital he had donated to the city amounted to an admission that she had inherited millions; for only a multimillionaire could make such a charitable donation.

Ranjit Sighn was not impressed by money; he was a multimillionaire himself. But the girl's enthusiasm over her small winning when she could probably have bought the whole track outright from her pocket money tickled his sense of humor.

It even seemed to amuse dour Maxim Karsh. By the end of the afternoon he had thawed so much that he was actually being pleasant.

In the process of giving out information about herself, April managed to acquire some about the two men too.

The sheik had a palace in Massagbah's capital city of Fada, a chateau on the Riviera, and a chalet in the Swiss Alps, she learned. But his favorite residence was his oasis fifty miles from Fada, out in the middle of the desert.

"It's the blood of my nomadic ancestors, I suppose," he said. "Even after years of exposure to western culture, I'm most at home in a tent."

"You live in just a tent?" she asked.

The sheik smiled. "There are tents and tents. This one happens to be a hundred feet square with numerous rooms, a modern kitchen, electricity and some rather priceless art treasures. I hardly rough it. It's quite as luxurious as any modern hotel."

"It sounds enchanting," she said.

"Just like an old Rudolph Valentino movie!"

Ranjit laughed at the comparison.

The only actual prying the girl did was as to Ranjit's marital status. He was a bachelor, he assured her, although under Moslem law he was entitled to a total of three wives.

April also learned that Maxim Karsh was a geological engineer, and his acquaintance with the sheik stemmed from the fact that his company was in the process of drilling for oil near the oasis.

This information was volunteered by Ranjit, and for some reason it seemed to upset the engineer. April got the impression he would have preferred the sheik to give no explanation of him whatever.

When the last race was over and the bookie Basher had settled accounts, the sheik asked April where she was staying.

"In London at the King George," she said.

"I'm at my club, which is only a stone's throw from there. May I call to take you to dinner this evening?"

When April graciously accepted the invitation, he pressed his advantage by asking if she would ride back to London with him in his limousine.

"Oh, I couldn't," she said. "I came with Lord Thaxton and the American Ambassador and his wife. We were in Lord Thaxton's box. I'm going to have to apologize for deserting them so shamefully all afternoon."

"Try to make excuses," he urged. "We'll wait for you at the main exit."

"I'll try," she said dubiously. "But don't count on it."

Her party was ready to leave and was waiting for her when she returned to Lord Thaxton's box. After apologizing for her long absence, she drew the ambassador aside.

"I managed to make my contact," April said. "You've been very helpful. Now I have a chance to follow it up. Do you think his lordship would be offended if I didn't drive back to London with you?"

"I'm sure he'll understand. The old fellow followed you with his glasses and saw you seated with that handsome bearded young fellow. He's quite a romantic beneath his reserved exterior. He probably expects you to desert us."

"Thanks," she said. "That's all I wanted to know."

She went over to the elderly Lord Thaxton and made her excuses to him and the ambassador's wife. Both assured her it was perfectly all right for her to return to London with Sheik Ranjit Sighn and Mr. Karsh.

She found the sheik waiting for her alone at the main exit.

"All set," she said. "Where's Mr. Karsh?"

"He went to tell the chauffeur to bring the car around from the parking lot. We'll be picked up right outside the gate."

The limousine was a long black Rolls Royce, chauffeured by an

Arab in uniform. Maxim Karsh was seated in front next to the driver.

Ranjit helped April into the back, told the chauffeur to drive to the King George Hotel when he reached London, then closed the glass partition between the front and rear seats.

"Now we can talk in privacy," he said.

April rather doubted that.

Knowing how THRUSH, the arch-enemy of U.N.C.L.E., operated, she was sure everything they said would be recorded for later study. It was possible, though, that Ranjit Sighn didn't know his limousine was bugged. According to her information on him, his connection with the organization was fairly recent, and he may not yet have learned that THRUSH didn't even trust its own agents.

As they turned onto the road for London, the sheik said, "Do you have to return to the States next week, April?"

"I'm afraid so. There's some business about my estate. A transfer of stocks, I think Larry said. He's my lawyer. I really don't know exactly what it's all about but nothing can be done without my signature. What difference would it make anyway? You said you have to go back to Mossagbah about the same time."

"I do. I thought I might talk you into coming along and seeing the wonders of the desert."

April smiled. "Sorry. Larry will have a fit if I don't show up in New York when I'm supposed to."

"I can't stand the thought of being parted so soon," the sheik said, taking her hand. "When will I ever see you again?"

"You're going to see me this evening."

"Oh, sure. And every evening for the next week, if you'll allow me. But after that are you just going to walk out of my life forever?"

His touch sent a small tingle along April's arm in the direction of her heart. My, he was a handsome man, she thought. It was too bad he was involved with THRUSH. Under other circumstances she might generate kinder feelings about him.

Steeling herself against such weakness, she said, "Do you ever get to Cairo?"

"Sometimes. If you're going to be there, I'll make a point of it."

"I'll be there for a day or two soon. I've signed for a Mediterranean cruise at the end of this month. I know there's a short layover at Cairo for fuel and supplies, because that's the end of the route. From there we start back."

"I'll pick you up in my plane and fly you to Mossagbah," he said enthusiastically.

"We won't be there that long," she protested. "I would miss my ship." .

"You can always catch it at some other port of call," he said

reasonably. “Tripoli or Tunis or whatever. I’ll fly you wherever necessary.”

She pursed her lips as though thinking it over.

“I suppose something like that could be arranged,” she said finally. “But suppose we table it temporarily. After a week of my company you may want to withdraw the invitation.”

“Never,” he said fervently, giving her hand a squeeze. “I consider the matter settled.”

When the sheik helped her from the car in front of the King George Hotel, she insisted it was not necessary to escort her into the lobby.

“I hardly think I’ll be attacked by any dragons between here and the front door,” she said with a smile. “They aren’t allowed to loiter in front of the hotel.”

“All right,” Ranjit conceded, smiling. “Can you be ready for cocktails and dinner by eight?”

“Easily. I’ll expect you then.” She stuck her head in the front window to say good-by to Maxim Karsh. The car was equipped with a telephone, she noted when she saw the bracketed instrument all the dash board.

As April Dancer walked from the lift to her hotel room, she dipped her hand into her bag and brought out a small, flesh-colored ear plug. Pushing back her dark hair, she slipped the plug into her ear. When she let her hair fall forward again, the plug was invisible.

The precaution had been instinctive, because April really hadn’t expected to find her room bugged. To her surprise a faint humming sounded in her ear the moment she opened the door.

THRUSH had moved even faster than usual, she thought. April had known she’d be put under observation after she managed to meet Ranjit Sighn, but she had hardly expected this rapid action,

Maxim Karsh, she thought. When she left the sheik waiting at the main gate and went after the car, he must have used the car phone to contact THRUSH’s London office.

April would have to be careful of that one. She was sure her masquerade as an idle American heiress had fooled him, yet he was taking no chances. Probably everyone who came in contact with Ranjit Sighn was thoroughly investigated.

Closing the door behind her, April Dancer moved over to the bed and dropped her bag on it. The hum grew louder until she reached the center of the room, then began to fade as she passed it.

Casually she turned, walked to the dressing table and examined herself in the mirror. Again, from this new direction, the hum was loudest in the exact center of the room.

The bug was in the overhead chandelier, the U.N.C.L.E. agent decided. She didn’t glance up, because it might be a visual device as

well as a sound receiver.

Returning to the bed, she picked up her bag and walked into the bathroom. When she closed the door behind her, the humming promptly stopped.

At least she could have privacy here, April Dancer thought sardonically.

She removed the ear plug and dropped it back into her purse.

THREE

NO MAN'S LAND

When April came from the bathroom she had arrived at a decision. She always got a mild kick from turning the enemy's own weapons against them, and the bug in her room gave her a perfect opportunity to give the listening agents an earful.

Going over to the writing desk, April sat and picked up the phone.

"I wish to place a call to Mrs. Cornelia Amster," she told the switchboard operator. "She's staying with Lady Mowbry in Kent. You'll have to look up the number, because I've forgotten it."

While she awaited the connection, she smiled to herself. There were advantages in having attended a good New England school. One was her schoolgirl friendship with Cornelia Amster, nee Crowley, heiress to the Crowley chain-store fortune.

THRUSH might have difficulty finding any record of a deceased American freezer king from Akron, Ohio named Dancer, but they could hardly question that Cornelia Amster was anything but an American heiress. She was as well known as Barbara Hutton.

April was also thankful for the American tabloids which reported Cornelia's every move. It was through them that she had learned her old school friend was honeymooning in England with her recently acquired second husband, and that the couple would be staying with Lady Mowbry for a week. April had made careful note of the honeymoon itinerary just for use in such an emergency as this.

She heard a very British voice say, "Lady Mowbry's residence."

"London calling," the operator said. "Mrs. Cornelia Amster, please."

When Cornelia came to the phone and recognized April's voice, she squealed, "April! Where are you?"

"At the King George in London. Having a happy honeymoon?"

"Simply divine. Henry is so sweet. I'm dying for you to meet him. When can you come up?"

"Corny, you don't want callers during your honeymoon."

"One more won't matter. We've been surrounded by people ever since it started. Henry is showing me off to all his relatives. He's the younger son of the duke, you know. I'd be a duchess some day if Henry had managed to get born before his brother Albert. Lady Mowbry is his aunt. I'm sure she would love to have you."

"I'm afraid I won't have time, Corny. I just called to say hello and

wish you happiness. I'll only be here a week and I'm all tied up I hope."

"What do you mean, you hope? Can't you spare me one day out of a whole week?"

April giggled. "Would you expect me to spare a day from a brand new romance?"

"Romance! Have you finally fallen, April? Who's the lucky bridegroom?"

"Whoa," April said. "I'm not planning to get married. Can you picture me in a harem in the middle of a desert? It's just a pleasant interlude."

"A harem? Are you tangled up with some oriental prince? You be careful! I nearly accepted the proposal of a sultan last year, and when I discovered he had *four other wives."*

"He's not a prince, Corny. He's the sheik of Mossagbah, and he doesn't really have a harem. He's a quite eligible bachelor. Tall and dark and handsome and absolutely divine. Would you believe it, he actually lives in a tent on a desert oasis. As he describes it, it's about the size of a palace and is furnished just as ornately, but it's still a tent. Just like Rudolph Valentino in the *Sheik*. I can hardly wait to see it."

Cornelia wailed, "April, you're not *going* there with him!"

"Not now," April reassured her. "Maybe not at all. Depends on whether he still looks as handsome to me a week from now. It won't be for some time in any event. I have to fly back to New York next week because of some tiresome legal business about a transfer of stocks or something."

Although Cornelia was fully aware that April had only modest financial means, April was reasonably sure she would exhibit no surprise at this. Her old school friend had been raised amid such tremendous wealth; she probably took it for granted that all women owned stocks and securities.

Cornelia said, "When are you going to visit this dreadful place?"

"It's not a dreadful place, Corny. The sheik says it's as comfortable as any modern hotel. At the end of the month I have a Mediterranean cruise planned. I happened to mention I would be stopping at Cairo. Ranjit said he'd meet me there and fly me to his canvas palace."

"It sounds dangerous to me," Cornelia said dubiously. "Way off alone in the desert with a handsome sheik. You be mighty careful."

"Oh, Ranjit is a perfect gentleman, Corny. Don't worry so."

"Ranjit, eh? Sinister sounding name. How long have you known this character?"

"I just met him today."

This brought another wail of protest from April's old school chum.

April soothed her by assuring her she could take care of herself. Before she hung up, she also had to assure her she would phone again before leaving for the United States.

That would stifle suspicion, she thought as she cradled the phone.

Naturally the phone was bugged, so THRUSH agents had heard both sides of the conversation. It should have convinced them that April was exactly what she seemed: a bored American heiress looking for new thrills.

Maxim Karsh was staying at the Woodford. The limousine dropped him there, then drove on to Ranjit Sighn's club. The sheik instructed the chauffeur to be ready to leave again at a quarter to eight.

Fifteen minutes later the squat, broad-shouldered Karsh paused alongside the parked Rolls Royce. Turning his oversized head to glance both ways, he opened the back door and lifted a hidden panel in the back seat. He removed a small cylinder from the recess beneath the panel and replaced it with another.

Back in his hotel room, he fitted the cylinder into a tape recorder, switched it to play-back and listened to the conversation which had taken place in the back seat en route to London.

When the tape reached the point where the sheik invited April to visit his oasis, his Slavic featured face darkened with anger.

After the taped conversation ended, he switched off the machine and strode from the room. Outside Karsh, caught a hansom cab and gave a Soho address.

The address was a dingy billiard parlor. Karsh told the driver to wait and entered the place. He passed through a room where seedy looking men were playing billiards at several tables, and he went into a men's room .

Checking to make sure the room was unoccupied, the short, squat man took a key from his pocket and unlocked the mop closet.

Karsh then switched on a light in the closet, pulled the door closed and locked it behind him. Reaching up, he gave the burning light bulb a half turn to the left. As the light went out, the rear wall of the closet slid aside to disclose a short passageway, ending in a curtained doorway.

The panel automatically slid back in place when Karsh stepped into the passageway. He pushed through the curtained doorway into a large room where several men monitored communication equipment of various types. One or two glanced up, then went back to their duties.

Going over to a slim, youngish man who sat idly before a panel, earphones clipped to his head, he said, "Anything?"

"She's taking a shower at the moment," the young man said. "You

can hear the water running even with the door closed. She made a telephone call right after she came in. Want to hear it? Now, I mean!"

"Of course," the squat man said impatiently.

The young man threw a switch on the panel. April's lovely voice came from a speaker saying, "I wish to place a call to Mrs. Cornelia Amster."

Karsh listened intently to the whole phone conversation. When it was over his expression indicated that his anger had somewhat abated.

"At least she doesn't seem to be a plant," he muttered, more to himself than to the young man. "Cornelia Crowley-Amster *couldn't* be an U.N.C.L.E. agent."

"Akrim double-checked the thing," the young man offered. "It actually is Mrs. Amster and her new husband staying with Lady Mowbry. So they didn't ring in an actress just to play the part for our benefit."

"I guess Miss Dancer is only what she seems," Karsh said, more relaxed. "Stay on the monitor until further notice."

He turned and retraced his way back through the men's room and on outdoors. He gave the hansom cab driver the address of Ranjit Sighn's club.

By the time he arrived at the club it was nearly a quarter of eight. Karsh saw the sheik, elegantly attired in evening clothes, just coming down the steps.

Telling the driver to wait again, Karsh climbed from the cab and went over.

The Arab chauffeur already had the rear door of the Rolls open for the sheik to enter. Ranjit paused to look at Karsh.

"Oh, hello, Maxim. What's up?"

"I'd like a word with you," the squat man said grimly, taking his elbow to lead him out of earshot of the chauffeur.

The sheik frowned at a wrist watch. "I haven't much time."

"You'll have to take time for this," Karsh said frigidly. "How dare you invite a woman to the oasis at this point? Have you lost your mind?"

The sheik's eyes narrowed.

"And how did you learn of the invitation?" he inquired ominously.

Maxim Karsh blinked. "That doesn't matter. What matters–"

"It matters to me," the sheik interrupted coldly. "I'm not one of your paid underlings. I happen to be the chief of state of an independent sheikdom. I haven't offered my services for money, but for a share in the eventual power. I highly resent being spied upon by an inferior."

The short, squat man reddened slightly. "I may be your social

inferior, Ranjit, but I am your superior in this project. You will learn that THRUSH requires absolute discipline, no matter what your status is in the world. It is my order that you withdraw this invitation."

The sheik's expression suggested he was more amused by the man's impudence than irked. He said sarcastically, "You certainly can't suspect April Dancer of being an U.N.C.L.E. agent."

"That isn't the point. As a matter of fact I instigated a check on her before we ever left the racetrack, and it seems she's an American heiress, all right. But you can't take any outsider to the oasis. She's bound to see things she shouldn't."

"She won't understand them," Ranjit said dryly. "As lovely as she is, she doesn't impress me as loaded with brains. I've already mentioned to her that you're supervising the drilling of an oil well near the oasis. That will account both for your presence there and all the activity going on. You worry too much."

"You don't worry enough," Karsh exploded. "I gave in to your unreasonable insistence on taking time out to race your horse, but I absolutely put my foot down on this. I forbid you to bring this woman, or anyone else to the oasis until our project is completed."

The sheik stared down his nose at him.

"I don't take orders from peasants," he said coldly. "If the lady accepts my invitation, which is my devout hope, you may expect to see her there as my guest. Meantime, whatever listening devices you have in my car or elsewhere to eavesdrop on my personal conversations, I expect to be removed at once. Understand?"

"I do as my superiors say," Maxim Karsh growled.

In the same cold tone Ranjit said, "Then, since I am obviously your superior in every way, eliminate the bugs. Now you will have to excuse me. I am already late for our reservation at *Annabel's* in Berkeley Square."

He strode over and climbed into the back seat of the limousine. Maxim Karsh glared after him, controlling his anger by chewing at his pendulous lower lip.

FOUR
DESERT DEATH DEALER

One week later April Dancer walked along a New York street in the shadow of the U.N. building. She turned into a modest shop whose window sign identified it as *Del Floria's Tailor Shop*.

At the rear of the shop a pleasant looking woman seated before a pressing machine glanced up and smiled. April smiled back, entered a dressing cubicle at the rear of the shop and pulled the door closed

behind her. She waited, facing the rear wall.

In the outer room the pleasant looking woman touched a button on the machine which had nothing to do with its pants pressing function.

A panel at the rear of the dressing cubicle slid aside and April Dancer stepped through into the lobby of U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

The U.N.C.L.E. agent exchanged a pleasantry with the clerk on duty, picked up her I.D. triangle–without which she would have set alarms to jangling all over the place if she had attempted to go farther–and walked down the hall to Alexander Waverly's office.

The director of U.N.C.L.E.'s New York headquarters was a tweedy, soft-spoken man past middle-age who gave the impression that nothing less than atomic attack could jar his inevitable poise. Two other people were in the office with him.

Mark Slate, in his early thirties, was a lean, muscular man with the eyes of a poet and the build of an athlete. A Cambridge graduate, an RAF veteran and a former member of the British Olympic ski team, he was a recent transfer from U.N.C.L.E.'s London headquarters.

His dress was a trifle flamboyant for an undercover agent, since an effort to look unobtrusive is usual in that field. It wasn't garish, but he wore a rather loud tie and a checked vest. He gave the impression that to complete his outfit he should have been strumming a guitar.

The other person was Randy Kovac, a tall, coltish teen-ager. Randy, still in high school, was an experiment. U.N.C.L.E.'s first and only part-time on-the-job trainee, he was supposed to work in Communications only four hours a week. The training so fascinated him though, he could be found at headquarters, as often as not in areas which had nothing to do with communication, practically every minute he could spare from school and study.

Mr. Waverly said in his usual formal manner, "Ah, Miss Dancer. We've been expecting you."

Mark Slate smiled at her affectionately and said, "Hi, April."

Randy, who had a teen-age crush on the girl agent, silently gazed at her as a peasant regards a queen, waiting for April to speak first.

April made Randy's day complete by greeting him first with a friendly, "Hi, Randy."

"Welcome back, Miss Dancer," he said enthusiastically. "Have a nice trip?"

"Just fine. How are you, Mark?"

"Curious. What did you find out?"

"Enough to know something definite is going on in Mossagbah." She turned to Waverly. "Mission accomplished, sir. The sheik has invited me to visit his oasis. He's to meet me in Cairo on the fifteenth and fly me there in his private jet."

Randy said, "Is this trip going to be chaperoned?"

All three looked at him. Randy blushed.

Waverly turned back to April.

"Excellent, Miss Dancer. You didn't attempt to learn anything about the project, did you?"

April shook her head. "You told me to do nothing which might arouse suspicion that I was prying. I even pretended some misgivings about visiting the oasis, but of course I finally let the sheik talk me into it. It is a THRUSH project, though. Maxim Karsh was with him."

Alexander Waverly's left eyebrow raised slightly, a gesture which for him denoted extreme startlement. "One of THRUSH's top electronic engineers. Well, well. Did the sheik volunteer any explanation of his presence?"

"He introduced Karsh as a geological engineer. He said Karsh's company was drilling a new oil well near the oasis."

Mark Slate said, "Maxim Karsh wouldn't know an oil well from a hole in the ground, He's strictly a physicist."

"You know him, Mr. Slate?" Waverly asked.

"Not personally. I read his dossier when I was stationed in London. He was one of those on the required study list for all agents."

"He's on the list at this headquarters too," Waverly said. "Which is how I assume Miss Dancer was familiar with his name. You had never encountered him before, had you, Miss Dancer?"

"No, sir."

"If Maxim Karsh is involved in this project, it must be a major one," Waverly said. "And it most certainly has nothing to do with oil." He turned back to Mark Slate. "I think we'll have you do a little advance scouting, Mr. Slate. Fly over to Mossagbah and do a bit of nosing around. Perhaps you can pick up some rumors of what's going on from the natives."

When Slate nodded, Waverly said to April, "You go ahead with your cruise as planned, Miss Dancer. By the time you arrive in Cairo, Mr. Slate should have some preliminary information for you. You can check with Cairo headquarters before you fly to Mossagbah with Ranjit Sighn."

"All right, sir," April agreed. Randy asked, "What kind of guy is this Ranjit Sighn?"

"A couple of years older than Mark, I think," April said. "Tall and dark and extremely handsome, with a cute little mustache and a goatee which makes him look kind of devilish."

She was unaware of the touch of dreaminess in her voice as she described the sheik, but Randy caught it. He said belligerently, "And just what's on this oasis?"

"Just a tent."

"A tent!" Randy said in a high voice. "You're going to spend maybe

a whole week or more all alone in the middle of the desert in a tent with this man?"

"It's not just an ordinary tent, Randy," April said with a smile. "It's more like a canvas palace, with innumerable rooms. Ranjit has assured me that I'll have my own private room in the women's quarters. And we'll hardly be alone. There are numerous servants with quarters in the tent."

"Oh," Randy said, somewhat mollified. "You be careful anyway."

Waverly told the boy in a kindly tone, "I'm sure she can take care of herself."

Mark Slate said, "I'll call the airport to see if I can get a reservation to Mossagbah tomorrow. Meantime, April, do you have a date for dinner tonight?"

"No, I came straight here from the airport."

"Then I'll pick you up at six-thirty. During dinner we can work out contact plans in case I'm still in Mossagbah when you get there."

"How romantic," April said with a mock sigh. "I'll be waiting with bated breath."

Slate cocked an eyebrow at her.

"I know I can't compete with a handsome multimillionaire sheik, but at least I can dance a mean frug. If you behave yourself, I may take you dancing after dinner."

By the time Mark Slate had been in Mossagbah two weeks, he gave up all thought of learning anything of significance from the natives. Not that he found them close-mouthed. He spoke Arabic fluently, and he had spent the first week in Fada simply picking up the Mossagbahan dialect.

With his hands and face darkened and robed as an Arab, he was accepted without suspicion when he began to visit the nomadic tribes.

It was simply that no one had any information as to what was going on at the oasis. While it was widely known that foreigners had built a number of strange buildings there, no one had any idea of their purpose. Since it was also understood that the foreigners were under the protection of Sheik Ranjit Sighn, the tribesmen exhibited no great curiosity. Ranjit was an absolute monarch. Too much curiosity about his affairs might not be healthy.

Eventually Slate decided that the only way he was going to learn anything was by a visit to the oasis.

It was just past dusk when he halted his camel atop a sand dune and studied the lights below. In the center of the oasis the walls of the huge, palace-like tent glowed dimly from lights within it. Even dimmer glows came from the numerous small tents surrounding it.

Just beyond the oasis several rectangles of light denoted the

windows of some kind of building.

Slate kneed the camel forward. Fifty yards from the oasis he halted again, signaled the animal to kneel, and dismounted. Leading the camel behind a sand dune, he drove an iron stake into the sand and tethered it securely.

Silently he circled the oasis on foot toward the rectangular lights. The moon was just rising. By its light he could see, when he got close enough, that the glow came from the center of a line of five flat-topped buildings. The other four, taller, longer and wider than the center one, were all dark.

This was a major project, he thought. The larger buildings were at least a hundred feet long by fifty wide and quite evidently factory buildings. The smaller one in the center of the row was probably the administration building, and fifty yards out in the desert, was a towering skeletal structure he could make out but dimly. Slate made a wide circle of the row of buildings in order to get a better look at it.

Twenty-five yards from the structure he dropped flat when he spotted a robed Arab guard armed with a rifle slowly patrolling around it. He was now close enough to make out what it was, however.

It was the half-completed missile tower of a rocket-launching pad.

On hands and knees Mark Slate headed for the administration building. Halfway there he sank flat again when he spotted another Arab guard patrolling the rear of the line of buildings.

When the guard had passed beyond him and had his back to him, Slate rose and sprinted to the shadows alongside the administration building.

The lighted windows were at the far end of the building, the end facing the oasis. Cautiously he moved to the nearest one and peered in.

It was a small mess hall. Seven men were at dinner around a single long table. They seemed to be of mixed nationality, but none looked Arabian.

The only familiar face he saw was at the head of the table. Slate had never personally met the man, but he felt sure he recognized Maxim Karsh from the complete description in his London dossier and from April's personal observation.

Retreating to the dark end of the building, Slate peered around the corner. The Arab guard had not yet reached the far end of his post and still had his back turned. Slate stepped around the corner and tried the door centered in that end of the building.

Finding it locked, Slate produced a small picklock and easily opened it.

A dimly lighted hall ran the length of the building, ending at the

door to the mess hall he had peered into.

Mark Slate hesitated for a moment, then drew out his U.N.C.L.E. gun and buried it in the sand just outside the door. He felt a trifle naked without it, but he knew it would be foolish to take it into the building with him. If he were surprised, the gun would identify him as an U.N.C.L.E. agent, even if he managed to shoot his way clear, thereby alerting THRUSH that U.N.C.L.E. was aware of the project.

Since nothing else in his possession which couldn't be easily disposed of in an emergency identified him, there was an excellent chance that Slate could pass himself off as simply an Arab sneak-thief if apprehended.

With a final glance toward the Arab guard, who was now ending his route and in a moment would turn to come back this way, Slate stepped inside and eased the door closed behind him. He left it unlocked.

There were two doors on either side of the hall, all but one standing open.

Glancing into the ones either side of the hall nearest the door by which he had entered, Mark Slate saw they were living quarters. Probably for Maxim Karsh and his first assistant, he decided, since they were both single rooms.

Halfway down the hall the open door on the right gave on to a larger room containing two sets of triple-decker bunks and six metal wall lockers. The barracks for the lesser technicians, Slate deduced.

Across the hall from the barracks was a closed door. Trying it, he discovered it was locked.

One twist of the picklock opened it. The room was dark, but by the light from the hall Slate spotted a wall switch.

Easing the door shut behind him, he flicked on an overhead light.

FIVE

DESERT DEATH DEALER

Slate found himself in a completely equipped, windowless physics laboratory. Glancing around, he spotted a small safe in one corner. He was making for it when something on a work table distracted his attention.

It seemed to be a scale model of a curious Y-shaped contrivance, consisting of numerous separable parts fitted together by small pegs and holes.

When Mark Slate looked inside the various pieces, he saw that the contrivance was a miniature model of some kind of space vehicle. Parts housed many kinds of elaborate machinery; there was a tiny control room with a panel full of knobs, levers and dials, and a living cabin with six tiny bunks.

Putting the model back together, Slate knelt quickly before the safe. From a pocket in his robe he took a small earplug similar to the one April had used to detect the listening device in her London hotel room.

Inserting it into his ear, he placed his ear next to the combination dial and slowly turned the dial.

After a moment Slate heard the distinct sound of a tumbler falling into place. Reversing the direction of his turn, he again moved the dial slowly until he heard a second click. Twice more he reversed movement, then, after the fourth click, tried the safe door. When it failed to open, he turned the dial again until there was another click. This time the door opened. He smiled, realizing it had been a five-number combination instead of a four.

Removing the earplug, Slate dropped it back into his pocket. Then with curiosity, he examined the contents of the safe. There was nothing inside except a set of drawings and some technical notes.

After rapidly scanning the drawings and notes, Slate drew out a gold medallion suspended around his neck by a golden chain. A small diamond centered the medallion and circling the diamond was a carved inscription in Arabic.

Holding each sheet of the notes and drawings flat on the floor, Mark Slate held the medallion over them and pressed a nearly invisible plunger on the medallion's back.

When he had completed this process, he carefully replaced all the

documents in the same order he had found them, closed the safe and spun the combination dial.

Taking out a fountain pen, he twisted the barrel and a small chromium antenna thrust upward from its end.

"Section two," he said in a low voice.

After a moment Alexander Waverly's voice said, "Yes, Mr. Slate?"

"I'm in the lab of the project at the oasis," Slate said, quickly. "Do you recall the secret super rocket fuel formula Professor Bettner reported stolen from his lab safe last February?"

"Yes, of course."

"THRUSH has it. They plan to use it to put the components of a space platform into orbit, then weld them into place in outer space.

"I don't know how far they've progressed with the individual components. There are four factory buildings here, but I haven't been inside any of them yet. They have the missile tower for a launching pad about half completed, though."

"Were you able to get to their plans?"

"I just finished microfilming all of them."

"Good work," Waverly said.

"Don't attempt to break into any of the factory buildings. Miss Dancer will be in a much safer position to look them over when she gets there. That microfilm is too important to jeopardize by risking apprehension over minor information. Get out of there and take the first flight back here you can get."

"Yes, sir," Slate said. "I'm on my way. I'll route through Cairo, so that I can leave word for April at headquarters there."

He twisted the pen barrel and the antenna disappeared. Putting the pen away, he flicked off the overhead light, cracked open the door and peered out into the hall. When Slate saw no one, he slipped out, pulled the door closed and re locked it with his picklock.

He had barely taken a step toward the exit from the building when the door to the mess hall began to open. Instantly Slate darted through the closest door, the one into the six-bunk barracks.

Pulling the door nearly shut, he watched through the crack as men trooped from the mess hall into the corridor. Since the room he was in, plus the two single ones, were the only rooms in the building aside from the laboratory and the mess hall, Slate knew he was going to have lots of company within moments if he waited around.

Clicking the door shut, he made for the moonlit window. It was barred by inch-thick steel rods spaced only about six inches apart.

Slate took out his fountain pen communicator and twisted the barrel and said, "Section two. Emergency. "

Almost immediately Alexander Waverly's voice said, "Yes, Mr. Slate?"

“I’m about to be taken,” Slate answered rapidly. “I probably can’t talk my way out of it, but I may be able to pass myself off as a sneak-thief.”

“Get rid of that communicator,” Waverly said sharply. “Don’t let them suspect you’re an U.N.C.L.E. agent at all costs.”

“Yes, sir, I know,” Mark Slate said, as he silently broke the connection.

The earplug in his pocket would be as dead a giveaway to his identity as the U.N.C.L.E. gun would have been. With his thumb and center finger he flicked it between the bars, far out into the night. The picklock wouldn’t be as much of a giveaway, but it might create suspicion that he had been in the lab. Slate dropped it into the sand just below the window.

Then he whipped out a small gunny sack, began jerking open locker doors and dumping everything of value he could find into the sack. A watch, two rings, three wallets, a set of jeweled cuff-links and two tie clips went into the sack before the door started to open. Before it opened completely, Slate had dropped his fountain pen communicator on top of the loot in the sack.

The man in the doorway switched on an overhead light, then gaped at Slate. Recovering, his hand darted beneath his arm and reappeared with a thirty-eight automatic.

Several angry-faced men were behind the first one. They all reached for guns too.

The man in the doorway, a thickset blond with heavy Teutonic features said, “Who are you?”

With a subservient bow, Slate answered, speaking in the Mossagbaban dialect, “I Abdul the merchant, master. I look for cook to ask for dinner.”

“Yeah?” the blond man said. His gaze fell on the gunny sack and his eyes narrowed suspiciously. Moving into the room, he said over his shoulder, “Perez, see what he’s got in that sack.”

The thin, wiry man named Perez and who looked Spanish, moved past him and took the sack from Slate’s unresisting hand. Perez dumped the contents on one of the bunks.

The blond man, Perez and the men crowding the doorway all stared from the items on the bunk to Slate. Slate gave them a cringing, apologetic smile.

“Why, you lousy thief!” the thickset blond man said finally. “Turn around and get your hands against the wall. Perez, shake him down.”

As Slate turned and leaned his hands against the wall, the blond man said to one of the men in the doorway, “Sven, hurry. Go get Karsh.”

By the time Sven returned with Maxim Karsh, Perez had

thoroughly searched the intruder and had reported there were no weapons or additional loot on his person. He had pulled out the medallion suspended by the chain around Slate's neck, and it now hung in plain view on the outside of his robe. Slate decided he might call less attention to it by leaving it where it was, than by attempting to shove it down inside his robe again.

The squat, wide-shouldered Maxim Karsh looked Slate up and down suspiciously. Suddenly he said in Arabic, "What is your name?"

He had an atrocious accent.

Apparently THRUSH wasn't as finicky about its agents' linguistic ability as U.N.C.L.E. was.

Sure of his pure Mossagbahan dialect, Slate said, "Abdul the merchant, master."

Karsh turned to the blond man and said in English, "Find anything on him, Fritz?"

Fritz shook his head. "Perez searched him. He's clean." Then, pointing to the loot on the bed, he added, "Except for that. He was cleaning out the lockers when we walked in."

Karsh returned his attention to Slate and said, still in Arabic, "Are you one of the sheik's men?"

"Yes, master. All Mossagbahans the sheik's men."

"I mean do you live at the oasis?"

"No, master."

"Where are you from?"

Slate shrugged. "From the desert. My tribe move with the winds."

Noticing the medallion hanging around Slate's neck, Karsh moved closer to examine it. "What's that?"

"Kadar prayer medal, master.

Protection against Jinn and Eblis."

Karsh started to reach for it; Slate stepped back and raised both hands protectively, "No, no, master. Beat me if you like, but no take medal. Is no protection for infidel."

Karsh reached impatiently for it again. Slate put his hand across it.

"Is sacrilege," he said with dignity. "His highness not like."

The squat man paused. Sheik Ranjit Sighn had made it quite clear that the western intruders should not violate any of the native religious customs. Even though this man was a thief, he was still a Mossagbahan apparently. Karsh decided it might be better for the sheik himself to handle the matter of the medallion.

He dropped his hand and Slate poked the medallion back down inside his robe.

"How'd you get in here?" Karsh growled.

"Door unlocked."

"I mean into the building?"

Karsh asked.

"Door unlocked too." Slate jerked his thumb in the direction of the door by which he had entered.

Karsh turned and left the room.

They could hear his footsteps receding up the corridor. When he returned, he glared at the blond Fritz.

"It was unlocked. You know security rules. You were on check duty this evening."

Then a sudden thought struck Karsh. Without awaiting the blond man's reply, he turned and strode across the hall. After trying the lab door, he took a key from his pocket and opened it. He left the door open, and through it Slate could see him glance around, then kneel before the safe and begin working the combination.

When he had it open, he carefully checked the documents inside, replaced them and closed the safe again. Relocking the lab door, he came back across the hall.

"We won't take any chances," he said to the blond Fritz. "The sheik will be able to tell if this man is really a native. Put that stuff back in the sack and bring it along."

The whole group seemed prepared to trail along, but Karsh delegated only Fritz and the wiry Perez to escort the prisoner.

"The rest of you take a look around the area," he ordered. "Abdul here had to have transportation. Find out what he used to get here and report to me at the sheik's tent."

Karsh then led the way up the corridor to the mess hall, through it and out the door leading from it to outdoors. Fritz and Pirez followed with Slate between them, covering him with pistols.

Karsh led them across the stretch of sand to the oasis and to the front entrance of the sheik's tent.

They were challenged by a robed Arab sentry just outside the tent, but when he recognized Maxim Karsh, he stepped aside to let the group enter.

This was it, Slate thought. It was going to take superb acting to convince Mossagbah's supreme ruler that he was a native. And if he didn't convince him, he was very shortly going to be dead.

SIX

ENEMY TERRITORY

Another Arab sentry armed with a rifle stood just inside the door. He frowned at the drawn pistols of Fritz and Perez, but apparently he knew them both; besides, it was quite obvious that they were drawn to cover the prisoner.

He let the group pass without making any objection to the guns.

The inside of the tent was like something from the *Arabian Nights*, with modern overtones. The main room was huge–probably fifty by thirty feet and the walls were hung with jeweled tapestries. A rich oriental rug covered the floor. Cushions to sit on were spread here and there, and low tables next to them contained beautifully carved gold and silver urns and chalices.

But there was also some modern western furniture among the oriental splendor. A long handsome teakwood dining room table with six ornately carved chairs had been placed in the center of the area. In one corner, there were a couple of long sofas and several easy chairs. Lamps spaced around the room were electric, Slate noted. Then there must be a generator, because cables could hardly have been run this far out in the desert.

A tall, handsome man in a white riding habit, glistening black boots and a jeweled turban was seated in one of the chairs reading a book. Even if he had met him somewhere else, Slate decided he would have recognized Sheik Ranjit Sighn from April's description. The thin black mustache and close cropped goatee did rather make him look like a debonair devil.

The sheik glanced up in mild surprise at the intrusion, then laid aside his book and regarded Slate and the two guns trained on him curiously.

Slate bowed deeply and said in Arabic, "May Allah smile on you always, most high and exalted one. I am your humble subject, Abdul the merchant."

Ranjit Sighn said, "Greetings, Abdul. May Allah smile on you also."

He looked at Maxim Karsh inquiringly.

Karsh said, "We caught this man looting the lockers in the men's barracks. At best he's a thief. At worst he could be an U.N.C.L.E. agent."

Ranjit glanced at Slate, with amusement, then back at Karsh. "Oh, come, Maxim. You see U.N.C.L.E. behind every palm tree."

“Maybe he is Abdul the merchant,” Karsh said doggedly. “He speaks Arabic. But that could be a pose. I want you to check him out thoroughly. You ought to be able to tell.”

Before the sheik could reply, curtains covering a doorway at the rear of the room parted and a dark, lovely young girl in Arab costume entered, bearing a tray containing coffee, sugar and cream. After glancing curiously at the visitors, she set it on a table next to Ranjit.

“Thanks, Konya,” the sheik said absently. “Would any of you gentlemen like coffee?”

Karsh answered for all of them with a guttural, “No thanks.”

The girl walked away and gracefully sank onto a cushion. She examined Slate’s darkened face with interest, then ran her gaze up and down his robed body.

Ranjit added sugar and cream to his coffee, stirred it and sampled it before turning his attention to Slate.

“What were you doing in the men’s barracks, Abdul?” he asked in the Mossagbahan dialect.

In the same language Slate said, “Liberating a few worthless possessions I thought the infidels would have no more use for, your highness. I was not aware they were under your protection.”

Ranjit smiled slightly. “What is your tribe?”

“The Kadars, your highness.” In English the sheik said to Karsh, “Nomads. Completely loyal. This is no U.N.C.L.E. agent.”

“How can you be sure?” Karsh asked.

“I understand that most U.N.C.L.E. people are excellent linguists, but you can always tell when a language has been learned in school. This man speaks the lower class Mossagbahan dialect without accent and knows the slang.”

“It is surprising more liberators of worthless possessions haven’t appeared before now, because word of the foreigners’ new buildings must have spread among all the nomadic tribes by this time. While no native would dare steal from me because it would be sacrilege, no such religious scruples apply to foreigners.”

Karsh was still unsatisfied. “He’s wearing some kind of medal around his neck. I want you to look at it.”

Without waiting to be told, Slate pulled out the medallion by its gold chain and moved nearer to the sheik.

Ranjit reached out to cradle it in his palm and examine it, then dropped it.

“A Kadar prayer medallion,” he said. “A fine one, too. Solid gold with a diamond setting. They sometimes save for years in order to own one. It keeps away evil Jinn and protects against Eblis, you see.”

“That’s what he said,” Karsh admitted reluctantly. “Who’s Eblis?”

“The prince of the apostate angels. Allah turned him into a devil

for refusing to worship Adam. Adam and Eve are in our mythology too, you know."

Slate tucked the medallion back down inside his robe.

The sheik frowned at the still drawn guns held by Fritz and Perez.

"Put those away," he said.

"They aren't necessary. And let's see what's in that sack."

The men meekly holstered their guns. Fritz handed over the gunny sack. After examining its contents, Ranjit gave it to Karsh.

"Return all the items to their owners and forget it. Now that Abdul knows you are under my protection, you won't be bothered again. I'll tell him to spread the word among his tribe, so that none of them will bother you again."

"You mean you're just going to turn this thief loose?" Karsh said indignantly.

The sheik frowned again. "He won't appreciate being called a thief. He broke no Moslem law by 'liberating' possessions from infidels. He wouldn't understand punishment from his ruler and protector."

"But suppose he is an U.N.C.L.E. agent after all?"

The sheik glanced at the fake Abdul. "You speak English, do you?"

"Some, a leetle, your highness,"

Slate said with an Arabic accent. "Not good."

"French?"

Slate shook his head. "No, your highness."

In French, which Slate spoke as well as English, Ranjit said to Karsh, "No U.N.C.L.E. agent could fool me into believing he's a Kadar, unless they've actually recruited a Kadar. And that's impossible. It would be against his religion to act against me.

"This man will obey any order I give him, but I'm not going to order anything he would regard as punishment. He has to be released."

Also in French, with an accent nearly as atrocious as his Arabic, Karsh said, "Would he obey your order to stay here and work on the construction project for pay? We could use another laborer, and at the same time we could keep an eye on him, just in case U.N.C.L.E. has managed to recruit one of your loyal tribesmen."

The sheik looked slightly pained by Karsh's refusal to accept that none of his subjects were subvertable, but after considering, he reluctantly nodded.

"That's an acceptable compromise which will save face all around."

He said to Slate in Arabic, "Abdul, the sheik has need of your strong hands in the building of the structure he has commissioned the foreigners to erect. You will receive pay in accordance with the number of hours you work. Understand?"

With a low bow, Slate said, “Yes, exalted ruler.”

“Go with Mr. Karsh here,” Ranjit said, pointing to the broad-shouldered engineer. “Do as he tells you. I will see that you are paid adequately for your work.”

Slate offered another submissive bow.

As he was led from the room, Slate glanced toward the servant girl, still quietly seated on her cushion. She gave him a shy smile.

A friend in enemy territory was always welcome. He smiled back, but his smile wasn’t shy. It was so intimate the girl blushed.

The man named Sven was waiting outside the tent. He said to Karsh, “He came on a camel. It was staked behind a sand dune over there.” He pointed vaguely to the west.

“What did you do with it?” Karsh asked.

“Put it in the corral.” He gestured in the direction of a large barbed-wire corral near the edge of the oasis.

In the moonlight Slate could see an armed Arab sentry slowly patrolling along the outside of the barbed-wire fence. That cut off his transportation, he thought. Even if he managed to overpower the sentry, he would be in full view of the guard stationed in front of the tent.

The whole place was crawling with guards; getting out of it was going to be a considerable problem.

And it was essential that he get the microfilm out.

The guard in front of the tent would have to go first, Slate decided. Once he was disposed of, the one guarding the corral could be taken.

Sometime after midnight, when the whole camp was asleep, he would make his move.

Maxim Karsh put a hitch in this plan. Slate had assumed he would be quartered in one of the smaller tents with other Arab laborers. His assumption was wrong. He was led back to the administration building arid placed in the single bedroom opposite Karsh’s.

“My assistant is in Switzerland locating certain electronic equipment,” the engineer explained. “His room will be vacant for a week, so you may as well use it. Aren’t you lucky?” Slate knew exactly how Karsh felt about him.

Slate attempted to summon a smile of appreciation.

“We rise at six-thirty and begin work at seven-thirty,” Karsh said curtly. “See you at breakfast.”

He went out, closed the door behind him and there was the sound of a key turning.

The cautious Slav was taking no chances, even after the sheik’s assurance that Abdul couldn’t possibly be an U.N.C.L.E. agent, Slate thought ruefully. He checked the single window and found it barred.

He took off his hooded robe and hung it up on a wall hook.

Beneath it he wore the typical costume of a desert nomad: baggy trousers stuffed into well-worn knee boots and an upper pullover garment somewhat resembling a sweat shirt.

Slate kicked off his boots, switched off the light and lay on his back on the single bunk.

After locking the newly hired laborer in his room, Maxim Karsh walked down the hall to the men's barracks. He found all six occupants there.

He said to Fritz, "Did you return everything to the proper owners?"

"All but this," the big blond man said, holding up a fountain pen. "Nobody claimed it."

Karsh took it from his hand and examined it.

"Good pen," he said. "You're sure it doesn't belong to any of you?"

One by one the occupants of the room shook their heads.

"It looks familiar," Karsh said with a frown. "Seems to me I used to have one like it. But how would it get in here?"

The slim Spaniard Perez said, "Maybe one of the fellows borrowed it from you some time, boss, and forgot to return it."

Karsh looked around the group.

"Did one of you borrow it? Is this my old pen?"

Nobody would admit being the culprit.

"Somebody here's mighty forgetful," Karsh growled. "Here after when you borrow something, remember to return it."

He stuck the pen in his shirt pocket.

SEVEN
ROAD TO ESCAPE

It was just past midnight when Slate was awakened by a low hiss outside his window. Rolling over to look that way, he saw the dim outline of a head and shoulders. This side of the building was in shadow, but the head and shoulders were silhouetted against the moonlight beyond it.

With a catlike movement he bounced erect and went over to the window.

It was the servant girl the sheik had called Konya.

Slate merely smiled at her and waited.

"Hello," she said shyly in Arabic.

"Hello yourself."

After a moment of silence she volunteered, "I am Konya."

"Allah bless you, Konya," Slate said. "I am Abdul."

"Allah bless you also, Abdul. Why have they made you a prisoner?"

"The infidel Karsh does not understand our ways," Slate said. "He

thinks I'm a thief. The sheik didn't order me locked up. It's only Mr. Karsh's idea."

"Do you wish me to talk with his highness?" Konya asked. "Perhaps he will order you freed."

Slate contemplated this and decided it might be poor tactics. Having passed one inspection by Ranjit Sighn, he preferred to stay out of his way. The sheik might ask some embarrassing question Slate couldn't answer, such as an inquiry after the health of some sub-chief of the Kadars of whom Slate had never heard.

"I'm not being mistreated," he said. "It's comfortable here. Tomorrow I am to start work on the steel tower the foreigners are building and am to be paid for it."

Konya said wistfully, "In a way I am as much a prisoner as you are."

"I thought you were a member of the sheik's household," Slate said in surprise. "You're a prisoner?"

"Not really. I only feel like one. Actually I have some status. I am the daughter of Orkhim."

"Orkhim?"

"The chief of his highness' personal guard."

"Oh. Then why do you feel like a prisoner?"

"You do not understand how it is with women in our country, because you are a man. Oh, I am envied by the other women of the oasis because I have fine quarters in the sheik's tent. I would not have to work as his servant. It is my own choice.

"But what is my alternative? I can live in the small, poorly furnished tent of my father and cook for him."

"You could get married," Slate said. "A girl as attractive as you should have no trouble finding a husband."

"To one of the sheik's guard or one of the laborers?" she said scornfully. "They are all ignorant and illiterate." She added proudly, "I was educated by the sheik's royal tutor. I speak English and French and can read and write in both. I have read in books of how women are treated in such places as the United States of America. Do you know that women there have the same rights as men?"

"Sometimes more," Slate said dryly.

"It is my dream to go to the United States," Konya said wistfully. "I would run away from this place in a minute if I thought I could get there." Then she sighed. "It is but an idle dream. I have no money and no friends in the outside world. I wouldn't get even as far as Fada before I was caught and brought back and beaten by my father."

Slate said, "Are you really serious about this?"

"I was never more serious in my life," she said fervently. "I hate my life here."

He examined her upturned face, considering whether to trust her or not. She could be a plant sent by the sheik to test him.

Then he decided she couldn't be.

The sheik had been so convinced of his estimate of Abdul the merchant, he been irritated by Karsh's continued suspicion. He decided to take a chance.

Switching to English, he said quietly, "I could maybe get you to America, Konya."

She looked surprised. In the same language she said, "You?" Then she frowned. "You speak English better than you did in the sheik's tent. You sound like an educated man."

"I'm not exactly illiterate," he admitted.

"You have been to school?"

"Yes."

She gave him a delighted smile.

"I knew there was something special about you the moment I saw you. You held yourself with more pride than the cringing dogs who serve the sheik. You are the first Mossagbahan aside from the sheik I ever met who had education."

He decided there was no point in letting her know he wasn't one of her countrymen. He said, "There are many others. Your experience has been confined to desert nomads."

"Could you really get me to America? You are only joking, of course. How could you do it?" she asked eagerly.

"Not only get you there, but see that you are taken care of after you arrived. I have friends. We'll go together."

She gave him a sidelong glance.

"You wish me to run away with you?"

He said, "Let's get something straight. I'm not making romantic advances. I'm suggesting a business deal. You help me get out of this cell and I'll take you with me to America. My friends there who will see that you receive enough training for you to get a job and make your own living. But don't get any romantic ideas."

She looked disappointed. There was a long silence. Finally he said, "Well?"

"You're not teasing me?" she asked. "How come you, a mere Kadar tribesman, have such important friends in America?"

"It's a long story," he said. "I'll explain it on the way to America. But may Allah strike me dead if I deceive you."

She stared at him through the bars for some moments. Then she breathed, "I believe you, Abdul. I do not understand, but I believe you. What do you wish me to do?"

"Do you know where the men's barracks room is?"

She nodded. "On the opposite side of the building."

“Somewhere in the sand just beneath the window is a thin strip of steel about three inches long. Find it and bring it to me.”

“A piece of steel?” she said puzzledly.

“Like a nail with a head, only thinner and flatter. It is what is known as a picklock. With it I can get out of here.”

“But why would such a thing be there?”

“Don’t ask questions,” he said patiently. “Just go find it.”

From birth Moslem women are trained to be submissive to their male betters. Konya was obviously still puzzled, but she obediently moved to the rear of the building and around to the other side.

She was gone nearly a half hour.

When she finally returned, she looked in at Slate apologetically.

“I have sifted the sand all around the barracks window with my fingers,” she said. “Twice I had to run and hide in the shadows of the building next door, because that side of this one is in moonlight and I heard the guard coming. The thing you wish is not to be found. The sand is so deep.”

That should have occurred to him, Slate thought. It was probably like trying to locate a needle in a haystack.

“Maybe it will be easier in daylight,” he said. “I’ll try to break away from work tomorrow and look for it myself. I guess we’ll have to postpone our flight until tomorrow night”

“I am sorry,” she said.

“It’s all right. This will give you time to pack a few possessions. Don’t take many, because we’ll probably be riding double on a camel. I’d rather not steal a mount for you.”

Konya understood this. A Mossagbahan wouldn’t steal from his sheik. Slate thought if unnecessary to explain that moral considerations had nothing to do with his decision. He merely wanted the sheik to continue to believe he was a Mossagbahan, even after he was gone, and that his reason for flight had been simply elopement with Konya.

“Shall I come tomorrow night at the same time?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Now you’d better scoot back to bed before a guard spots you.”

“Good night, Abdul,” she said softly, and faded away from the window.

Apparently Mossagbah didn’t have any labor laws, Slate thought sourly after his first day of work on the launching pad tower. He and the Arabs working with him under the supervision of the THRUSH engineers and technicians put in a twelve-hour day in the boiling heat with only forty-five minutes for lunch.

All the laborers except Slate were allowed to return to the oasis during the noon break, for lunch prepared by their women folk. Slate

lunched in the mess hall under the watchful eye of THRUSH men.

No one objected when after lunch he wandered outside and sank into the shade of the administration building just beneath the barracks room window.

He noted that Perez and Fritz followed him out and sat in the shade on the same side of the building, however. Maxim Karsh was still taking no chances that Abdul the merchant might just possibly be an U.N.C.L.E. agent.

Idly Slate sifted sand through his fingers. It was so dry and loose, he could probe down several inches. Occasionally he unobtrusively shifted position. By the time Maxim Karsh blew a whistle in signal that it was time to go back to work, he had covered the whole area beneath the window.

His groping fingers had encountered nothing but sand. Probably the picklock had worked its way down a foot or more.

Slate contemplated using the next day's lunch break to dig up the U.N.C.L.E. gun buried by the rear door of the administration building, but rejected the idea after some thought. He could hardly shoot his way past seven THRUSH agents, plus the Arab guard. Even if he did manage to fight his way to the corral and escape on a camel or horse, he would be pursued across a hundred miles of desert to the Mossagbahan border.

Besides, that would leave no doubt in anyone's mind that they had been harboring an U.N.C.L.E. agent. Also Slate had promised to take Konya with him.

The only realistic plan of escape was somehow to get out of his cell during darkness. There was no point in recovering the U.N.C.L.E. gun until he was ready to take off.

That night Konya visited him again.

"Did you find the little steel thing?" she whispered.

"No. It's hopeless. I have another plan, but it'll have to wait until tomorrow night."

She looked disappointed. "I am all packed to go, Abdul."

"Then you won't have to pack tomorrow night. Do you know what is in any of the other four buildings?"

Konya shrugged. "The sound of machinery comes from them. I do not know what the machinery's purpose is."

"There must be a work bench with small tools in at least one of them," Slate said. "Would you be challenged if you wandered through the buildings tomorrow?"

She pursed her lips. "I could say I was looking for the sheik. If I wait until the lunch break, there will be few in the buildings."

"Fine. I want you to steal a hacksaw blade. Know what one looks like?"

She shook her head.

"It's a slim, steel saw blade about so long," he said, spacing his palms apart about a foot. "It has little steel protuberances on either end which fit into a frame with a handle. But I don't need the frame, just the blade. Think you'd recognize one?"

"Oh, yes," she said confidently, "You describe very good."

During the morning of Slate's second day of labor a small jet plane was wheeled from the building farthest north. Ranjit Sighn, wearing a white linen suit and a jeweled turban, was accompanied by an Arab attired in a chauffeur's uniform.

They climbed into the plane. It took off and disappeared into the distance.

"Never mind the rubber-necking," Maxim Karsh yelled from below to the workers on the tower. "Get back to work."

That night Konya passed a slim metal blade between the bars. Slate was elated until he examined it. It was a scroll saw blade.

When she saw the expression on his face, Konya said worriedly, "It is not right?"

"Apparently I don't describe as good as you thought," he said kindly. "This will only cut wood. A hacksaw blade is a little wider and longer and heavier. I also should have mentioned that it will probably be blue steel."

"I saw one of those," she said forlornly. "I thought the little one would be easier to conceal."

"Want to try again tomorrow?" "All right," she agreed. "But my heart was set on going tonight."

"It's only one more day, Konya.

Where was the sheik going?"

"To Cairo. I do not know why." Slate did. April's ship was due to dock there that afternoon.

After Konya left Slate snapped the scroll saw blade in half and attempted to pick the lock. It didn't work.

He hid it beneath the pad on his bunk for future reference.

EIGHT

“THEY CAN RULE THE WORLD”

When her ship berthed at Cairo, April Dancer was a little put out to find Ranjit Sighn waiting for her at Customs. She had written him to meet her at the Royal Hotel, where she had an overnight reservation. His meeting the ship confronted her with a problem, because she had planned to stop by Cairo’s U.N.C.L.E headquarters en route to the hotel.

April didn’t let her irritation show, however. She clasped both his hands in hers and gave him a delighted smile. His response was just as enthusiastic. She suspected that only the inbred reserve of an Oxford education prevented him from publicly attempting to take her into his arms.

She liked the expensive cut of his white linen suit and admired the turban with a ruby in the center of the forehead. April studied Ranjit for a minute.

“You look more like a sheik than you did in England,” she said. “There you merely looked like a handsome race horse owner.”

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do,” he said with a smile. “In England people stare at a turban. Here it’s accepted as a matter of course.”

“I like it,” she told him. “It makes you look kind of interestingly sinister. You’ve surprised me, you know. I didn’t expect you to meet the ship.”

“I couldn’t wait until this evening.” Reluctantly he released hands. “Do you mind?”

“I’m glad,” she lied. “You can help me through Customs.”

He was a help there, so much of a help that her irritation nearly disappeared. With the sheik running interference she had no problem with Customs at all. She was bowed through with only the most cursory inspection.

The same uniformed Arab chauffeur Ranjit had with him in London loaded April’s luggage into a limousine, this time a Lincoln. It also had a phone in it, she noted. As a matter of fact the sheik called her attention to it.

“We could phone the hotel from the car and cancel your reservation,” he suggested with animation. “Then we could drive straight to the airport.”

“I haven’t seen Cairo yet,” she objected. “I want you to take me

night-clubbing."

"Of course," he said instantly. "I am being selfish. It is only that I am eager to show you the wonders of Mossagbah's desert."

He told the chauffeur to drive to the Royal Hotel.

It was only three when they arrived at the hotel. April said she wished to take a shower, and afterward a short nap so that she could stay up late for a night on the town. She suggested that Ranjit return for her about six.

Obviously he had been prepared to monopolize her every minute, because he had the afternoon all planned.

"You won't want to miss the bazaars," he said. "And they won't be open tonight.

"I would rather miss them than the night clubs," she told him. "And it's a choice of one or the other. Honestly, I'll be unable to keep my eyes open tonight if I don't have a nap. We had a ship's party last night which lasted until all hours and if you must know, I had a little too much French champagne."

He gave in gracefully. With a parting hand squeeze the Sheik said he would return promptly at six.

On the way up in the elevator with the bellhop, April slipped the flesh-colored earplug from her bag and fitted it into her ear.

THRUSH still wasn't trusting her completely, she discovered when the bellhop keyed open her room door. The moment she stepped inside, a low humming started in her ear.

When the bellhop had been tipped and had departed, April casually moved about the room until she located the bug. This time it was in the lower left corner of the dressing table mirror.

She sat at the dressing table and creamed her face, at the same time unobtrusively studying the device from the periphery of her vision. The mirror was fixed to the wall by decorative glass-headed studs in each of its four corners. The lower left one was slightly different. It was the same design, but there was a tiny glass lens in its center.

A visual bug, she thought indignantly. The peeping Toms! Since she was relatively sure THRUSH didn't really suspect she was an U.N.C.L.E. agent, and this was merely a routine check ordered by the suspicious Maxim Karsh, the only reason for a visual bug was that some lecherous agent hoped for an eyeful when she prepared for bed.

She would stymie that little peep show, she thought. And right now.

A box of tissues lay on the dressing table for the convenience of the guests. April picked it up, drew out a handful of tissues and carefully wiped off the cleansing cream. When she was finished, she carelessly

tossed the tissue box down. It landed at an angle, so that she was still in view of the lens as long as she was seated at the dressing table, but the view of the rest the room was blocked.

April let her eyes droop and stifled a yawn. Then she rose, went over to the phone and called the desk.

"This is Miss Dancer in room 312," she said. "I'm going to take a nap and want to get up at five. Will you please ring me?"

The desk clerk said he would be glad to.

Hanging up, April crossed to the bed, sat down just hard enough to make the springs creak and removed her shoes. She dropped them to the floor one at a time. They landed on the carpet with two subdued but distinct thumps.

When she flopped back on the bed, the springs creaked again. She emitted a tired sigh.

Slowly and silently she rolled to the edge of the bed, eased her stockinged feet to the floor and stood erect without allowing the springs to creak this time.

Stooping for her shoes, she tiptoed to the door.

She took a good fifteen seconds to open the door, turning the knob slowly so that there would be no giveaway click. Just as slowly and quietly she turned the small catch which would leave the door unlocked. When she returned, she didn't want to risk the sound a key would make in the lock.

Easing the door closed behind her and allowing the knob to turn so slowly that the catch re-engaged without sound, April slipped on her shoes. Then she took out her compact and replaced the makeup she had removed with cleansing cream.

Although she considered it unlikely, it was possible that a THRUSH agent was stationed in the lobby. To circumvent the possibility, she located a fire stairs, walked down three flights and came out in an alley. Then April Dancer jammed a match folder between the door and the frame next to the spring catch of the fire exit so that she could get back in the same way.

Four blocks from the hotel she entered a small book store. When a dark-haired female clerk politely asked what she could do for her, April said, "Do you have Alexander Dumas Pere's *Three Musketeers*?"

Momentarily the dark-haired woman's eyes hooded over. Then she said with a smile, "In the original French?"

"No, in Greek," April said, "That will be in the classical section," the woman murmured. "Come this way, please."

She led the way to the rear of the shop and through a curtained doorway into a smaller room whose walls were lined with bookshelves. At the rear of the room she stooped to touch something on the underside or a lower shelf.

A section of bookshelf swung aside to reveal a divided black curtain.

When April stepped through the curtain, the bookshelf automatically swung back in place.

She found herself in a lobby nearly identical to that of New York's U.N.C.L.E. headquarters. The clerk on duty glanced up, and, failing to recognize her by sight, asked, "Name and assignment, please?"

"April Dancer, Section Two, New York headquarters."

"Ah, yes, Miss Dancer. We've been expecting you. One moment, please." He noticed how attractive she was. Then, consulting his agent file, the clerk pressed a combination of buttons on a small panel before him and glanced up at a screen similar to a television screen fixed on the wall.

The screen began to glow, then front and profile portraits of April appeared on it.

"I guess you pass," he said pleasantly, flicking a switch to darken the screen. He handed her an I.D. triangle. "Last door at the end of the hall. Walk right in. Mr. Raj will know you are coming by the time you get there."

April walked down the indicated hall, opened the door and went in. It felt good to be back at an U.N.C.L.E. headquarters again. A stocky man with one of the pleasantest smiles April had ever seen sat behind a large, hand-carved desk.

Rising and bowing, he said, "Amhed Raj, Miss Dancer. Please be seated. Did you have a pleasant voyage?"

"Very pleasant," she said, taking a chair. "Has Mark Slate left any messages for me?"

Amhed Raj sank back into his desk chair. "Unfortunately, no. U.N.C.L.E. is no longer in contact with Mr. Slate. But I'll let your own chief explain the situation. He asked to be contacted the moment you arrived."

Raj pressed one of numerous buttons on a desk panel before him. Light flickered across a large glass screen on the wall and Alexander Waverly's image appeared behind a desk. Young Randy Kovac was standing beside the desk.

"Hi, Miss Dancer," Randy said eagerly. "We sure miss you around here."

In his quiet voice Waverly said, "Glad to see you arrived safely, Miss Dancer. Have you anything to report?"

"Ranjit Sighn met me at the ship," April said. "I managed to shake him long enough to get here, but he's to pick me up again at six. I probably won't have opportunity to contact you again until we get to the oasis, because I'll be with the sheik except when I'm in my hotel room, and my room is bugged."

Waverly frowned. “You’re under suspicion?”

“I don’t think so. I think it’s just routine precaution. Maxim Karsh doesn’t trust anybody. What happened to Mark?”

“He was taken three days ago, at the oasis. His last message indicated he thought he could pass himself off as a sneak thief, and we’ve heard nothing since.”

“He’s probably okay,” Randy put in loyally. “Mr. Slate can wriggle out of any spot.”

Waverly glanced dourly at the boy. “Before his capture he learned and reported on what THRUSH’s project is at the oasis. The super rocket formula stolen from Professor Bettner’s laboratory some time back is in the possession of THRUSH. They are building a space platform at the oasis, presumably with the intention of putting its individual components into orbit, then welding them together in outer space.”

April asked, “What advantage will a space platform give them?”

Randy, who kept abreast of all facets of the space program, said dramatically, “They can rule the world. With atomic weapons aimed at Earth, they can deliver notice to every nation that unless the reins of government are turned over to them, they will blast their cities to nothingness one by one.”

Cocking an eyebrow in Randy’s direction, Waverly said, “Lucidly put, young fellow, but–harumph. That obviously is their aim, Miss Dancer. No doubt they plan to blast a few cities in advance as object lessons. Probably such places as New York, London, Paris and Moscow.”

April’s dark eyes flashed. “What are your orders, sir?”

“First locate and release Mr. Slate, if he’s still alive. If he isn’t, recover the Moslem prayer emblem he was wearing around his neck. It contains microfilm photographs of all THRUSH’s plans for the space platform. Contact Section Two when that is accomplished for further instructions.”

“Yes, sir,” April said, her eyes wide with alert understanding of her grave duty.

Ahmed Raj reached for the panel button to cut communication. Before the picture faded, Randy got in the final word.“You be careful, Miss Dancer,” he said.

NINE
THE EVIL PLACE

It was four-thirty when April got back to the fire door leading from the hotel into the alley. She found the match folder she had left in the crack of the door undisturbed. She dropped it in her purse and let the

door click shut behind her.

When April reached her room, she kicked off her shoes and picked them up with her left hand. She turned the knob with the same care she had used when she left and cracked the door open just far enough to slip inside.

After easing the door shut, April Dancer glanced toward the dressing table. The tissue box was still in the same position she had left it, she was relieved to see. If it had been moved, it would have been sure evidence that her ruse had been discovered.

Tiptoeing to the bed, she stooped to lay her shoes on the floor without sound, then carefully eased herself onto the bed. Noiselessly she shifted over a little at a time until she lay on her back in its exact center.

April lay quietly staring at the ceiling for twenty minutes before the phone rang.

The U.N.C.L.E. agent let it ring three times before sitting up and swinging her feet to the floor. When she said, “Hello,” into the mouthpiece, April made her voice husky, as though it were still heavy with sleep.

“It’s five o’clock, Miss Dancer,” the desk clerk said.

“Oh, thank you.”

Cradling the phone, she yawned audibly. Then April crossed to her suitcase, took out sheer fresh lingerie and carried it into the gleaming bathroom.

She made a second trip to choose an apple green evening dress and green satin shoes with square rhinestone buckles from her wardrobe trunk. April carried these into the bathroom also.

She was starting to close the bathroom door when a thought occurred to her. Returning to the bedroom once more, April carried her purse into the bathroom and closed the door.

She fitted the flesh-colored earplug into her ear. There was no humming sound. Satisfied that the bathroom wasn’t bugged, April removed it and dropped it back into her purse.

On the verge of undressing to take a shower, a pixie thought struck her.

Reopening the bathroom door, she crossed over to the dressing table, picked up the tissue box and pulled out a tissue. After rubbing at an imaginary spot on her dress, she dropped the tissue into a waste basket and tossed the box back on the dressing table. It landed some inches to the right of the visual bug, so that the entire room was again in view of the tiny lens.

Humming to herself, April sat on the edge of the bed, her profile to the bug, and stripped off her stockings. She did it slowly, letting the nylon caress her long, well shaped legs as each stocking came off.

Then she rose, reached for the zipper at the back of her dress and slowly pulled it down.

April crossed her slender arms to grip the dress on either side, as though preparing to pull it off over her head, then casually walked into the bathroom just as the hem began to rise.

Closing the door, she smiled. She hoped that the dirty old man who was on the receiving end of the visual bug had high blood pressure.

Anticipation should have raised it considerably, and perhaps the sudden letdown had given him a stroke.

After her shower, April emerged from the bathroom fully dressed.

Ranjit Sighn arrived promptly at six. Tonight his turban was centered by a diamond. He wore black formal trousers, black patent-leather pumps and a white jacket.

He was a handsome devil, April had to admit, when she opened the door to his knock. That she had to regard him as an enemy made April feel some regret.

He seemed equally impressed by her appearance. He said slowly, "I didn't think it possible, but you increase in beauty every time I see you, April."

"It must have been my nap," she said lightly. "You're quite handsome yourself this evening."

"Thank you," the sheik said with a bow, and offered his arm to escort her to the elevator.

In London Ranjit Sighn had been so charming and gentlemanly that April had found it difficult to remember he was a tool of THRUSH. Although he had made no secret of the immense attraction he felt for her, he had never attempted any more familiarity than a good night kiss. This, coupled with his air of almost overpowering virility, had intrigued April more than she was willing to admit.

It wasn't until tonight that she got a glimpse of a side of his nature he had never revealed before, and finally realized why he had aligned himself with an organization she regarded as the embodiment of treachery and evil.

It was late in the evening, after a fine dinner and a tour of Cairo's better night spots. They had finally come to a small, quiet native cafe where a stringed quartet softly strummed the discordant notes so pleasing to the eastern ear, but so difficult to appreciate by westerners.

April sipped a glass of dry wine.

Ranjit, who didn't drink alcohol because of his Moslem religion, dawdled over a cup of tea. He dropped a hand on top of one of hers.

"I called you sultana when we first met," he said. "You would make a lovely sultana-mine, dear April."

"Is that a proposal?" she asked lightly.

"Yes."

The simple statement sobered her. After gazing at him for a moment, she squeezed his hand and said, "I'm an American girl, Ranjit. I'm flattered by the offer, but our backgrounds are too far apart I'm afraid I wouldn't be very happy in a tent–no matter how modern–in your desert so far from Rome."

"You would rule beside me over far more than just a desert, April."

"You mean your Riviera chateau and your Swiss chalet? You told me yourself your favorite home was the oasis. Besides, I couldn't leave Christianity and embrace your religion."

"Religion won't be a factor in the world much longer," he said. "That's no problem."

She examined him quizzically.

"What do you mean by that?"

He shrugged. "Religion is a mean of controlling the masses. I go through the forms of my inherited faith because it's one of the things I use to keep my subjects in order. But soon there will be so many more effective means, religion will no longer be necessary as a social control mechanism."

"Soon? And why?"

"Vast revolutionary changes are on the verge of taking place in the world, April. The old orders are going to crumble and new rulers will emerge. I don't plan to remain merely the ruler of an obscure and almost unknown sheikdom forever. I'm going to be one of the powers in the new regime."

"I'm afraid you're over my head," April told him innocently. "Are you talking about the movement to consolidate the Arab states?"

Releasing her hand, he made an impatient gesture. "I'm not talking about anything you've read in the news. This is something the world is going to discover quite suddenly and drastically." His eyes began to burn with a fanaticism April had never before seen in them–a fire so bright and soul-consuming that, she instinctively recoiled. It frightened her.

The sheik was too engrossed by his obsession to notice April's reaction. Fixing her with his burning gaze, Ranjit said, "How would you like to become empress of the entire East?"

So that was what had impelled Ranjit Sighn to barter his soul to THRUSH, she thought. Power. He was selling out his sheikdom, selling out the whole Arab world, even selling out his religion on the promise of being made one of the rulers of the new era.

She would have felt sorry for him if his barter hadn't been so ruthless. If THRUSH succeeded in its monstrous plan, Ranjit Sighn would never rule, she knew. He would be cast aside as a no-longer-

necessary tool–probably he would even be assassinated–and some member of the already established hierarchy of THRUSH would move into the promised spot.

Quietly probing for more information while the sheik was still wound up enough in his dream to be indiscreet, April said, “You can’t possibly mean that little Mossagbah intends to conquer the entire East. Even if you had the military strength, the U.N. wouldn’t permit it. You would find yourself at war with the whole world.”

“Mossagbah won’t even be involved in the matter,” Ranjit said confidently. “At least not militarily. I can’t go into details, but the revolution I speak of will be world-wide and sudden. All I can tell you is that I’ll be in one of the key spots when it’s over. You will have to accept that on faith, April. Do you think I’m merely a paranoiac with delusions of grandeur?”

April pretended to study him.

Then she smiled. “No, Ranjit. I’m sure you’re quite sane. And I’m convinced you actually believe what you’re talking about. But it sounds so incredible. What kind of revolution is going to take place?”

“I can’t tell you that,” he said soberly. “But believe me, it is inevitable and it isn’t far off. When it comes, I want you with me on the winning side. I’m offering you a choice between sharing in the rule of an important part of the world and the loss of everything you now have. In the new order the idle rich will certainly be stripped of all their possessions. I don’t want that to happen to you.”

“You frighten me,” April said. ”I’m really beginning to believe you. I don’t know why, because it sounds so fantastic, but all at once you’ve convinced me that this revolution is actually going to take place.”

“It’s as inevitable as tomorrow’s rising of the sun,” the sheik said. “Do you want to be my empress?”

She reached across to squeeze his hand. “Can’t we wait until this new order becomes a fact before I decide? And I haven’t seen Mossagbah yet, you know, Ranjit.”

The obsessive light in his eyes faded, to be replaced by a mask.

“The cautious Americans,” he said dryly. “I’ve seen the same characteristic in your businessmen in oil deals in countries where the governments weren’t quite stable. They always wait to see which faction is going to end up in control before offering backing.”

She had momentarily lost him, April felt. Quickly she brought the situation back under control.

“I’m not simply being selfish,” she said in an offended tone. “I would want time to consider, no matter what you were or what your prospects are. Even if it meant my financial ruin, I couldn’t say yes until I was sure I loved you.”

“I’m sorry,” Ranjit said with instant contrition. “Of course you may have time. I wouldn’t want you unless you loved me.”

It bemused April that he made no mention of loving her. She couldn’t imagine being proposed to by an American man without first hearing a declaration of love. The Moslem relationship between men and women was so different; perhaps love was something the men didn’t understand.

Despite his constant air of gallantry and the respect with which he treated her, April suspected that if she ever did marry Ranjit Sighn, even if she held the title of empress, she would be regarded as his slave.

Later that night when she was alone, April had no trouble remembering that he was a tool of THRUSH. The sheik had given her too close a look at the true nature beneath his charming veneer. Ranjit Sighn was as ruthlessly unconcerned about anything but his own power as any THRUSH agent.

CHAPTER TEN

HOT–OR COLD

They left the airport in the sheik's private jet the following morning. The Arab chauffeur, whom the sheik told April was also a professional pilot, handled the controls with ease.

They had been flying over desert which stretched endlessly to the horizon for some time, when Ranjit suddenly pointed through a cabin window below.

"The Mossagbahan border," he said with pride.

April peered downward. There was no sign of change in the forbidding terrain. All she could see was a small concrete structure which she recognized as a pillbox. Then she spotted another pillbox perhaps a mile beyond the first, and still more arranged in a curving line off into the distance.

Why did Mossagbah need a fortified border, she wondered dismally? Who would want it?

April's question was answered a few minutes later, when they began flying over one oil tower after another. The barrenness of the land was no disadvantage when oil flowed beneath it. Any oil-hungry nation would be glad to step in and take it over if the opportunity arose.

Shortly afterward the sheik pointed out a small dark spot on the burning sand some distance away.

"My oasis," he said, smiling.

As the spot increased in size and its color began to turn to a rich green, April saw that it was ringed by towering palms.

"It is beautiful from the air," she said. "What is it called?"

"Its original name in Arabic means 'The Garden of Life,' but it is never called that. The natives simply refer to it the oasis of Ranjit Sighn."

The plane came in to a smooth landing and taxied over near the edge of the oasis between it and a line of five adjoining buildings which had been built on the sand near the oasis.

The pilot cut the engine, touched a control on the panel, the cabin door automatically opened, and a set of metal steps descended to the ground.

Ranjit Sighn backed out first and assisted April to the ground. Glancing around, April saw numerous Arabs and a smattering of men

in western dress lolling in the shade of the buildings or under palm trees of the oasis. She decided if these men were connected with the project, it must be the noon lunch break.

A partially completed framework of steel girders towered above the buildings some distance beyond them in the desert.

"Why are you drilling so close to the oasis?" April asked the sheik. "It seems a shame to spoil the view of the desert with an oil tower."

"You have to drill where the oil is," he said with a smile. "Here comes Maxim to greet us."

April glanced in the direction Ranjit was looking and saw that the squat, broad-shouldered engineer had just emerged from the central and smallest of the five buildings. Before he reached them, two Arabs arrived from the direction of the oasis.

They seemed to have come to unload the luggage, because when the sheik spoke to them in Arabic, they bowed, climbed the ladder and began hauling out baggage.

Maxim Karsh approached with a sour expression on his face. He was thinking, she realized, that the sheik must have brought her here over Karsh's strong objections.

Nevertheless April threw him a dazzling smile and said, "Hello, Mr. Karsh."

"How are you, Miss Dancer?" he said politely enough, but without any real welcome in his voice.

"Hello, Maxim," the sheik said casually, then ignored him and offered his arm to April to escort her to the tent centering the oasis.

Maxim Karsh trailed along behind them.

A robed Arab guard armed with a rifle came to attention as they passed into the tent. Another immediately inside momentarily came to attention also, then relaxed quickly at a negligent wave of the sheik's hand.

April gazed around with interest at the oriental luxury so incongruously mixed with western furniture.

Ranjit touched a small gong. A moment later the curtains over a door at the rear of the main room parted and a lovely young Arab girl appeared.

"This is Konya, April," the sheik said. "Miss Dancer, Konya."

The girl inclined her head in a small bow.

April smiled at her and said, "How do you do, Konya."

"Konya will show you your quarters," Ranjit said. "Get Miss Dancer anything she desires, Konya."

"Yes, your highness," the girl said in fair English. "Follow me, please, Miss Dancer."

Maxim Karsh had determinedly followed them into the tent. He stood quietly until April and Konya had disappeared, then looked at

Ranjit with barely suppressed anger.

"You've really managed to put us into hot water," he said. "I have received word that Lin Yang is coming here."

"Lin Yang, eh?" the sheik said with more interest than concern. "What's he want?"

"To inspect our progress on the project, obviously. He'll be furious when he learns you've brought an outsider here. I'm going to tell him you did it over my strong objection."

"Don't worry about April," the sheik said. "She thinks you're drilling for oil. I made sure she knows nothing about oil before I invited her. She thinks that launching pad tower is an oil derrick."

"Well, you can explain her to Lin Yang."

"Lin Yang doesn't worry me. He may be big in THRUSH, but he won't be so big when this is over. And until then, no one is bigger than me in Mossagbah."

"Why do you have to be so difficult?" Karsh complained, "I'm supposed to be in charge of this project. Lin Yang isn't going to take the excuse that I can't control you just because you happen to rule this godforsaken country. "

"This godforsaken country happens to be my homeland and I consider it beautiful," Ranjit said coldly. Then he relented and smiled. "I'll concede it's probably uncomfortably hot working out there on the tower and that there isn't much social life to be had. You need to relax. Would you like to dine with me and Miss Dancer tonight?"

Karsh looked somewhat mollified by the invitation.

"All right," he agreed. "What time?"

"About seven."

"I'll be here," Karsh said. Meantime Konya had led April along a short corridor to the rear of the tent. They passed an opening through which April saw a modern electric stove, a refrigerator and other kitchen equipment. Other openings seemed to give on to sleeping quarters.

At the end of the corridor was a rear exit from the tent. Konya turned through a doorway just before it.

The room was about twenty by fifteen feet, with elaborate jeweled tapestries covering the walls and a rich oriental carpet on the floor.

Like the outer main room, it was furnished in a combination of oriental and western style. There was a wide, comfortable looking sleeping mat and the usual cushions. But there were also a couple of easy chairs and a modern dressing table. In one corner was an ornately carved round bathtub.

The two Arabs brought in April's luggage, placed it where Konya directed, and departed.

Konya said, "Would you like a bath before lunch, Miss Dancer?

There is time. Agri will not even start to cook until she has conferred with his highness."

"Agri?"

"The cook."

"Oh." April eyed the tub. "Sounds interesting, but I don't see any faucets."

"I will bring the water," Konya said. "You like hot or cold?"

"In this weather about lukewarm would be fine," April said.

"I shall return shortly," Konya told her, and departed.

April seated herself at the dressing table, dipped her hand into her purse and brought out a rattail steel comb. At the same time she palmed the flesh-colored earplug. In case she was under visual observation, she didn't want just to push the plug into her ear without camouflaging the act.

With the comb in her, right hand and the earplug palmed in her left, she pushed back the hair on the left side of her head preparatory to running the comb through it. The plug slipped into her ear. She ran the comb through her hair several times before stopping, then removed the plug and let it drop with the comb into her purse.

April was slightly surprised that there had been no humming sound in her ear. Maxim Karsh must have finally decided she was harmless after receiving the report that nothing suspicious had been heard or seen by means of the visual bug in her Cairo hotel room.

From her purse she took a fountain pen similar to the one that Mark Slate had dropped into the gunny sack of loot.

Twisting the barrel to cause the antenna to shoot out, April said in a low voice, "Calling Section Two."

After a moment Alexander Waverly's voice said, "Yes, Miss Dancer?"

"I just arrived at the oasis, sir. I haven't had an opportunity to look for Mark Slate yet. There are four rather large buildings and one smaller one near the oasis. Beyond them is a partially completed steel tower somewhat resembling an oil tower."

"Part of the launching pad," Waverly said. "Mr. Slate already described the physical setup in one of his reports before he was taken. Is Maxim Karsh there?"

"Yes, sir," April said. "He finally seems satisfied that I'm harmless, because he knew I was coming and my room isn't bugged."

"Good. Report back as soon as you learn what happened to Mr. Slate. And keep on the lookout for that Moslem prayer medallion."

"Yes, sir," April said. Then, hearing approaching footsteps, she added hurriedly, "Someone is coming," and twisted the barrel of the fountain pen to make the antenna disappear.

April had dropped it back into her bag and was touching up her

lipstick when Konya appeared with a steaming earthenware jug balanced on her head.

“This is only the hot,” the girl said as she decanted it into the bathtub. “You must wait until I also bring the cold.”

ELEVEN

THE GIRL FROM THE OUTSIDE

April Dancer had no opportunity all afternoon to find out what had happened to Mark Slate. She did her best by suggesting after lunch that she would like to see the oil-drilling operation.

"It's too dangerous while drilling is going on," Ranjit told her. "If they happened to strike a gusher while we were nearby, the whole tower might blow up in the air and come down on our heads."

April couldn't decide whether to resent his considering her stupid enough to swallow this, or be pleased that she had convinced him she knew so little about oil-drilling operations.

The sheik suggested a ride on the desert.

"I don't have any riding clothes with me," she said.

Ranjit had a surprise for her. He had accurately estimated her measurements and had brought back from London a complete riding habit in anticipation of her visit. April had no choice but to agree to the ride.

They spent the entire afternoon on a horseback ride across the desert. It was insufferably hot, and April got the peculiar impression that the sheik had insisted on it as a kind of test of her ability to be a desert queen. Since she had no desire to make him lose interest in her at this point, she managed to pretend that she thoroughly enjoyed the ride. The sheik was quite obviously impressed by April's ability to tolerate the oppressive heat. Apparently, the girl remained cool and collected.

They reined in their horses atop a tall sand dune which gave them a view of the endless waste for several miles.

"I find beauty in the desert," the sheik said. "But perhaps it is because I was born and grew up here. Most westerners see only the sand and feel only the heat."

That was all April could see and feel, but she said with enthusiasm, "There is beauty in it, Ranjit. I really love it."

Ranjit was obviously delighted with April's reaction.

It began to cool by the time they got back to the oasis at six. When April Dancer entered her room at last, she found Konya preparing another bath.

"I saw you ride in," she said. "I knew you would want to freshen up after your hot ride."

April stripped off her riding habit, bathed quickly and put on a

cool white dress. She joined the sheik in the main room of the tent at a quarter of seven. The only other person present was the Arab guard just inside the entrance to the tent.

The sheik took both her hands and smiled down into her face. "Now that you have seen my home, have you come to any decision?"

She glanced at the Arab guard. "I would rather not discuss such a personal matter in front of people, Ranjit," April said in a low voice.

"Orkhim? He sees and hears only what I wish him to. Otherwise he is blind and deaf."

He tried to take her into his arms, but April twisted away. With a touch of frost she said, "I don't make love in front of an audience, Ranjit."

"Excuse me, my dear," the sheik said with a formal bow. "I was carried away by your beauty. But I would really like an answer one way or the other."

"I haven't had time to think" she protested. "You only asked me yesterday."

"Did I?" he asked wryly. "It seems eons ago. Perhaps I haven't been aggressive enough. I know that Americans have a different way of thinking than we do."

April cocked an eyebrow at him. "And, yes, perhaps this is neither the time nor place to discuss it," Ranjit said with a glance at Orkhim. "His presence doesn't bother me, but it obviously does you. Suppose I drop by your quarters later tonight, where we can talk in privacy."

When she did not reply immediately, he smiled at her. "I said talk. Surely you're not afraid of me?"

April examined him with pursed lips. "Not as long as you understand that this American girl doesn't have loose moral values." Then she decided to change the subject. "I thought Mr. Karsh was dining with us."

"He should be along any minute," the sheik said. Raising his voice, he called, "Orkhim, look over toward the administration building and see if Mr. Karsh is on his way."

As the guard left the tent, Ranjit said, "He's been chief of my guards since I was a young man, shortly after my father died. He's Konya's father, you know."

April was surprised. She had been under the impression that the guard was rather young, because his beard was coal black and he had a powerful build. She looked at him more closely when he came back in and realized by the lines in his face that he was past middle age.

"He is not yet in sight, your highness," Orkhim reported.

At that moment Maxim Karsh was already in the tent, but he hadn't entered by the main entrance. He had come in by the rear way and had slipped into April's room.

Taking a small device from his pocket which resembled a jeweled shirt stud, except that its base was about the size of a half dollar, he unscrewed the jeweled head. At a point where the wall tapestry was divided, he thrust the base behind it and forced its pointed tip through the material into the center of a cluster of jewels. When he screwed the head back on, it merely looked like one more jewel.

After examining his handiwork critically, he slipped back out the rear way and rounded the tent to the front entrance.

"Sorry I'm late," he apologized to the sheik. "I was held up by an emergency problem." He bowed to April. "Good evening, Miss Dancer."

The sheik touched the small gong which served as a signal for Konya. When the girl appeared, Ranjit said, "You may tell Agri we are ready for dinner."

The dinner, surprisingly, was not Mossagbahan food, but New York steak, and it was delicious. Wine was served to April and Karsh, but in deference to the religion he had confessed to April he followed in form only as a social control mechanism, Ranjit took none.

Conversation was light until, near the end of the meal, the sheik asked Karsh how progress on the "oil rig" was coming.

With a sharp look at April, Karsh said, "I don't think we should bore Miss Dancer with shop talk."

Assuming her best rattle-brained manner, April said brightly, "Don't mind me. I know nothing of the oil business, but shop talk never bothers me. I love to hear men talk business even when it's over my head."

"Daytime is for business," Karsh said definitely, looking pointedly at the sheik.

"As you wish," Ranjit said with a shrug. "Your mess steward mentioned needing supplies, however. Does that come under the heading of shop talk?"

Apparently it didn't, because the comment caused Karsh to remember he had a list in his pocket from the mess steward.

Producing it, he asked. "Can you send your plane for these tomorrow."

"Of course," Ranjit said. He reached across the table for the list.

"Wait a minute," Karsh said. "I need a couple of personal items I may as well add on."

Taking out a fountain pen, he added a few words to the end of the list and passed it across to Ranjit. The sheik thrust the list into his pocket without looking at it. Karsh, who had finished eating, continued to toy with the pen.

"When is Lin Yang due here?" the sheik asked.

April pricked up her ears. Lin Yang was director of the Mideast for

THRUSH.

Maxim Karsh frowned and shot a side glance at April. Looking amused at his caution, Ranjit said to April, “Lin Yang is an oil expert Mr. Karsh is calling in for consultation.”

Karsh glared at him, then apparently decided the girl couldn’t possibly know who Lin Yang was and it was too late to suppress his name anyway.

“The message didn’t say,” he said shortly.

Suddenly, to her horror, April saw a small chromium antenna protruding from the end of the pen Karsh was toying with. Neither he nor Ranjit had noticed it.

In the Communications room at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters in New York Randy Kovac was monitoring the central communicator. Suddenly a strange voice came over the audio band assigned to Mark Slate.

The voice had an Oxford accent and was saying, “Have you ever met Lin Yang?”

A guttural Slavic voice answered shortly, “No.”

“I haven’t either,” the first voice said. “It should be quite an experience if all I’ve heard is true. He’s supposed to be a brilliant man.”

Then April Dancer’s voice intruded, saying, “May I see that pen for a moment?”

After that there was silence. The teen-age on-the-job trainee listened for several more moments, then rushed toward Mr. Waverly’s office to report the strange reception.

At the oasis, April had plucked the pen from Maxim Karsh’s hand at the same time she made the request overheard by Randy. She twisted the barrel as she did so, causing the antenna to disappear.

As Karsh stared at her in surprise, she said in explanation, “I have one just like it.”

In demonstration she lifted her bag from where it lay on the chair next to her and produced her own pen. “See, they are just alike,” she said, holding her own up alongside the other. “Where did you get yours, Mr. Karsh?”

“A gift, I think,” he said laconically, holding out his palm for its return. “I’ve had it a long time.”

April had no choice but to give it back. Dropping her own pen back into her bag, she returned the bag to its former position.

A moment later Konya came to clear the dishes from the table. When she had brought coffee, she stood waiting next to the sheik until he glanced up.

"Yes, Konya?"

"Will I be needed any more tonight, your highness?"

"Why? What do you want to do?' Konya merely blushed.

"Ah, our lovely Konya has finally found a lover," the sheik said indulgently. "You never had eyes for any of the local men. You haven't taken up with one of the infidel workmen, have you?"

"No, your highness. He is a Mossagbahan."

"Then run along while the moon is still bright," Ranjit said with a negligent wave of his hand. "Tell Agri she can clear the coffee cups later."

"Thank you, your highness," Konya said with a small curtsey, and ran from the room.

The sheik glanced toward the sentry at the door. "I hope Orkhim didn't overhear that. He's rather strict with the girl, but it's time she had a lover."

April looked toward the door.

The immobile sentry gave no sign of having overheard the conversation.

Konya went straight to her own quarters, slipped a shawl over her shoulders against the cool night air and exited from the rear of the tent.

Making her way to the edge of the oasis, she waited until the guard patrolling the front side of the buildings had his back to her, then sped across the moonlit space to the near side of the administration building.

The man she knew as Abdul the merchant was waiting at his barred window.

"I could not get back to the machine shop today, Abdul," she said breathlessly. "I am sorry, but I was busy during the lunch hour. The sheik brought a rich American lady to visit and I had to prepare her bath,"

"It doesn't matter," he said. "I won't need a hacksaw blade now. I saw the lady arrive. I want you to take a note to her."

Konya gazed at him with a mixture of surprise and jealousy. "Would not such a fine lady be offended to receive a note from a poor tribesman?"

"I'm not exactly a poor tribesman," he informed her. "I told you I have friends in America. I know the lady well. She'll help us both to escape from here if you do as I say and don't ask questions."

"All right," she agreed, but she couldn't suppress a pout.

Although Moslem women are used to unquestioning submission to their men, they are as femininely capable of jealousy as women anywhere.

He passed a slip of paper between the bars to her.

TWELVE

NO MAN'S GIRL

The guard changed at eight. Ten minutes after Konya was dismissed by the sheik, Orkhim was relieved from duty. He went straight to his tent, leaned his rifle in a corner and walked outside again, where his wife Adana was tending a pot over a small fire.

"The meat will be ready in a minute," she said.

"The meat can wait," he said grimly. "Woman, why have you not told me that your daughter has a lover?"

She looked up at him. "My daughter? And is she not your daughter also?"

"Answer me!"

"I know of no lover Konya has," Adana said. "Since she moved to the big tent, she no longer has time for her mother. Will you eat?"

"Not until I settle this," he said, and strode off into the darkness.

He searched every secluded nook of the oasis, his heavy black beard bristling more and more angrily each time he found some secret place empty. He startled bachelors by abruptly jerking back tent flaps and peering into their tents. He covered every bachelor tent on the oasis and found every one home.

Konya was nowhere to be found. Orkhim was stalking back toward his own tent when he spotted a slim, shawled figure darting toward the oasis across the moonlit stretch of sand between it and the foreigners' buildings.

He was waiting in the shadow of an enormous palm tree when the girl started to slip by.

Konya gasped when he suddenly stepped from behind the tree and snatched hold of her wrist.

"Where have you been?" Orkhim demanded.

"Just for a walk, father," she said fearfully.

Holding her wrist with his left hand, he backhanded Konya across the face with his right. "You lie! You have been with your lover!"

"No, father," she said, trying to pull away. "I have no lover."

"I heard you confess it to the sheik!"

"I did not. It was his highness who used the word lover, not I."

Orkhim twisted Konya's wrist and she winced. "Do you deny you have been with a man?"

"Only a friend, father. Not a lover."

"Aha. A friend, you name him.

And you came from the direction where the infidels live. Have you

taken up with an infidel?"

"No, no, father. He is one of us and a true believer."

"Lying wench! Nothing but infidels live in the wooden building." He bent her wrist until she was forced to her knees. "Name the dog!"

"Please," Konya said. "There is one living in the wooden building who is not an infidel"

He stared down at her, then slowly released her wrist. "The Kadar? The man who calls himself Abdul the merchant?"

"Yes, father. I only go to him to talk. Mr. Karsh keeps his door locked and his window is barred, so we do not even touch."

Orkhim frowned. "Why is he treated like this?"

Still on her knees, Konya said, "Mr. Karsh does not understand our ways. He still believes Abdul is a thief. I do not think his highness knows he is locked up at night."

"Hmm. Does this Abdul have any wives?"

"No, father."

"Does he own sheep or goats?"

"I have not inquired."

"Well I will inquire. If he is a merchant, as he says, he must own something. Merchants are sometimes rich."

"I do not think he is rich," Konya said. "But he is educated. He has been to school. He knows how to read and write."

Orkhim was impressed. Like most illiterates, he tended to be awed by education. The prestige of having a son-in-law who could read and write would be great. Far greater than merely having a daughter with these accomplishments.

As a matter of fact, the latter was something of a disadvantage. It sharply limited her matrimonial prospects, because men were uncomfortable with a woman who was their intellectual superior.

Reaching down, he pulled Konya to her feet.

"Why did you not tell me of your interest in this man, my daughter'?" Orkhim asked in a kindly tone. "Such things should be arranged by your father even before you speak to the man. I will speak to the sheik tomorrow."

"But we are only friends, father," she protested. "Abdul is not looking for a wife."

"Every man should have a wife. An educated man should have an educated wife. Not as greatly educated, perhaps, but enough so that he will not find her dull. Don't worry. Your father will arrange it. I will also protest to the sheik about my future son-in-law being locked up like an animal. He will be freed tomorrow and your mother and I will take him into our tent until the wedding."

"Please, father. You will embarrass me. He doesn't want to marry me."

“How could you know?” Orkhim asked reasonably. “He and I haven’t discussed it yet. The sheik will furnish the dowry, of course, since I am chief of his guard and you are a favorite of his. I shall ask for three horses, ten sheep and ten goats. No man is going to refuse a dowry like that.”

“Father,” she wailed. “I don’t want you to arrange anything.

“Be still, child. I know what is best for you. Now I must leave you, because your mother has my meat ready. I will speak to the sheik in the morning.”

He moved on toward his tent.

After glaring after him in exasperation, Konya continued on toward the rear entrance to the big tent.

Maxim Karsh took his departure at eight-thirty. A tall, angular Arab woman with a lantern jaw came to clear the coffee cups. When the sheik addressed her as Agri, April realized she was the cook.

After Agri disappeared, April Dancer said, “I think I’ll freshen up a bit, Ranjit. Will you excuse me for a few minutes?”

“Of course,” he said rising. Glancing toward the new guard who had replaced Orkhim, he said in a lower voice, “Instead of returning here, suppose I join you in your quarters in–say, a half hour?”

His intimate tone suggested that despite his earlier assurance that the only reason he wanted to visit her quarters was to talk, he had something more active in mind than that. It looked as though she might have occasion to use her judo training, April thought without enthusiasm.

The vagrant thought flitted through her mind that if the sheik hadn’t revealed his ruthless and conscienceless inner soul to her in Cairo, she might have welcomed his suggestion, because he was still one of the handsomest men she had ever met. She virtuously suppressed the thought, but it lingered long enough to make her smile of agreement more promising then she meant it to be.

“All right,” she found herself saying. “I’ll expect you about nine.”

As she pushed through the divided curtain into the rear corridor, Konya came in the back way. They met halfway along the corridor.

“May I see you a minute, Miss Dancer?” the girl said in a low voice. “In here.”

She pushed aside a curtain and switched on a lamp inside. Following her, April found herself in a tiny but comfortably furnished room. There was no western furniture here. There was only a sleeping pad, a couple of sitting cushions and a small table with washing utensils on it and a small mirror hanging on the tent wall above it.

A round bundle of clothing which looked as though it had been packed for traveling lay on the floor near the foot of the sleeping pad.

Konya tossed her shawl onto the sleeping pad, produced a folded piece of paper and silently handed it to April. Then she stood waiting, her face expressionless.

Unfolding the paper, April immediately recognized Mark Slate's handwriting. The note read:

I am in the last room on the south side of the administration building. No one, including the girl who brought you this note, knows who I really am. I'm known locally as Abdul the merchant. The only reason I'm locked up at night is because Maxim Karsh wouldn't trust his own mother. Days I work as a laborer on the launching-pad tower. Twelve hours a day! They don't have unions here. How about springing me tonight? Konya is taking off with me, incidentally, she doesn't like it here either.

Mark

April Dancer refolded the note, dropped it into her purse and glanced at the girl. She caught the barest hint of accusation in Konya's gaze.

Why, she's jealous of me, she thought, and was surprised to find herself feeling a touch of jealousy for the Arab girl also.

Why? She asked herself. Mark was merely a co-worker and a good friend–well, an especially good friend.

His romances were none of her business.

"Is Abdul the lover you went to meet?" she asked.

"He is the one I went to see. He has made it clear he has no wish to be my lover." There was a mixture of wistfulness and bitterness in Konya's tone.

Of course Mark would make that clear, April thought, feeling mild guilt that she had assumed he would be heartless enough to lead the girl on for his own advantage.

She said, "You want to leave here with him anyway?"

Konya gave a determined nod.

"Don't build up your hopes that things will change," April said gently. "The man you know as Abdul will keep whatever promises he has made, but he isn't husband material. Are you sure you want to leave here?"

"I would want to leave here if I had never met Abdul," Konya said passionately. "This oasis is a prison. Abdul promised to take me to the United States. Does he really have friends who will care for me and see that I get training to support myself?"

"He does," April assured her.

"You may trust him completely."

"We will have to leave tonight. Tomorrow night will be too late."

"Oh? Why?"

The girl flushed. "My father caught me returning from my visit to Abdul. He forced me to tell where I had been. I had to tell. He twisted

my arm and slapped me, and would have beat me if I refused."

"Oh, oh," April said. "What's he going to do?" -

"Tomorrow he goes to the sheik to arrange our marriage," Konya said miserably. "He is going to ask his highness to furnish a dowry. I will die of embarrassment if we do not get away from here tonight."

April patted her arm. "Don't worry. The two of you can leave tonight. Can you get back to see him again without being stopped by your father?"

"Yes. This time I will be very careful."

"Then deliver a message to him. I won't write it, because it will be safer for you to carry it by word of mouth. Now listen carefully."

For some minutes April explained exactly what she wanted Konya to tell Mark Slate. Then she asked her to repeat it back.

Konya had it nearly letter perfect.

When she finally reached her own quarters, April took Mark's note from her purse and also took out a match folder. Touching flame to the paper, she dropped it into a censer and watched it burn to ashes.

She seated herself at the dressing table and took out her fountain pen communicator and called Section Two. Young Randy Kovac answered.

"Is Mr. Waverly there, Randy?" she asked.

"He's in conference with Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin," Randy said. "Want me to break in?"

"Never mind," April said. "You can relay this on."

THIRTEEN

DEATH TRAP

Marl Slate was lying on his bunk in the dark, hands behind his head and staring at the ceiling, when another hiss came from outside his window.

Glancing toward the window, Slate saw the silhouette of Konya's shawled head. He swung from the bunk and padded over to the window in stocking feet.

"Hello again, Konya," he said.

"Did you give the note to Miss Dancer?"

"Yes, Abdul. She sent me to bring you instructions. We are going to leave tonight."

"Fine," Slate said with enthusiasm.

"She sent you this," Konya said, passing a cigarette lighter through the bars. "But I do not see how it will get you out of here."

Slate examined it in the dimness and smiled. "You'll see in a few minutes. What else?"

"The guard changes at twelve. She thinks it is best to wait until then, as it will be four hours before the next guard change. That will give us a long start before the next guard change, she says. She is going to tranquilize the guard posted in front of the sheik's tent and also the one on duty at the corral, but I don't know what that means. Is she going to kill them?"

"I doubt it," Slate said. "She isn't very gory"

"Well, she says that at ten after twelve she will tranquilize the guard in front of the tent, and by twenty after twelve she should have the guard at the corral tranquilized also. Just to play safe, she does not want you to appear at the corral until twelve-thirty. I will meet you there."

"How about April–Miss Dancer? Will she be there also?"

Konya shook her head. "She said to tell you she can be of more value remaining here. She said if she also fled, it would be too obvious. I do not know what she means by that."

Mark Slate did. If April disappeared along with him, it would be a dead giveaway that they were both U.N.C.L.E. agents. And Mr. Waverly didn't want THRUSH put on guard until headquarters had a chance to analyze the microfilmed plans of the space platform and could decide what action to take.

The flight of only Abdul the merchant and Konya would be

interpreted merely as an elopement by a couple of Arab lovers, he hoped.

Slate said, “Never mind. I understand it. She say anything else?”

“Only that I should ask if you still have the prayer medal.”

“Tell her yes. That all?”

Konya nodded.

“Now I’m going to need your help,” Slate said. “Where are the guards now?”

“I will check,” she said.

She slipped to the front end of the building. When she came back to the window, she said, “They are both coming this way. One is opposite the building just north, the other opposite the one just south. They will pass either end of this one about the same time.

“But why do you worry? They cannot see me in this deep shadow when I press myself against the wall.”

“They would be able to see what I’m going to have you doing in a minute,” Slate told her. “Tell me as soon as they’ve both passed.”

She kept glancing both ways. After a few minutes she whispered, “Now,” and pressed herself close to the building.

There was silence for several moments, then she straightened and said, “They are gone.”

Slate estimated he would have about fifteen minutes before the sentries came back on their return route. Crossing to the bunk, he stripped off its lone blanket and carried it to the window. He stuffed one end through the bars.

“Pull it on through,” he directed. With a puzzled expression on her face, the girl obeyed.

“Now hold it up in front of the window, but about a foot away,” he instructed. “There’s going to be a rather bright light in here for a few minutes, and. I don’t want it seen from the oasis. Don’t get the blanket too close to the window or it will catch fire.”

Still looking puzzled, she spread her arms and held the top edge of the blanket as high as she could. “Like this?”

“Just fine. Now keep it there.” He touched a nearly invisible catch on the bottom of the cigarette lighter Konya had given him. When he pressed the lever on top, instead of the usual small yellow flame appearing, a thin blue flame nearly six inches long hissed outward.

Slate brought the flame to bear on the base of the center window bar. The metal glowed so white hot, it lit up the room as the thin flame ate through it.

Within less than a minute the bar had been cut through entirely. He cut through the base of the bars on either side, then asked Konya if her arms were tired.

“No,” she said. “I am fine.” Pulling over a chair, Slate stood on it to

attack the top ends of the bars.

"Hold the blanket a little higher," he cautioned.

Konya strained up on tiptoe, managing to raise the blanket another three inches completely blocking the small gap which had formerly been at the top of the window.

Slate carefully cut the top ends only three-fourths of the way through. Now, when he was ready to leave, a firm shove outward would snap them off the rest of the way. Meantime an unexpected check of his cell would disclose nothing unless the bars were closely examined.

Putting out the cutting torch, he dropped the lighter into his pocket and carefully stepped down from the chair.

"All right," he said. "You may pass the blanket back in."

Konya lowered her arms and stuffed one end of the blanket between two bars. He drew it back inside and replaced it on the bunk.

With the blanket in front of her face, Konya had been unable to see what Slate had been doing, her only hint being the glow of light and the feeling of heat. She looked at the bars.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"I see no change."

Returning to the window, he said, "Good. That's the idea. I've fixed the bars so that I can get out whenever I want to now. You'd better leave before the guards get back."

"All right," she said. "You will be at the corral at twelve thirty?"

"Uh-huh. See you there."

Konya faded away. Slate went over to the bunk and stretched out on his back again.

There was the sound of a key turning in the lock. Slate sat up, swung his feet to the floor and stared at the door.

It opened. The visitor flicked the wall switch next to the door and the overhead light went on. It was Maxim Karsh, and behind him were the blond Fritz and the wiry Spaniard Perez. Both had guns in their hands.

"All right, Mr. Mark Slate," the squat electronics engineer said harshly. "On your feet."

About the time Konya was leaving by the rear door of the sheik's tent for her second visit to Mark Slate, clutching the lighter April Dancer had given her in her hand, Maxim Karsh was sitting before a work table in the laboratory in the administration building. On the table was a boxlike instrument containing a glass screen and a speaker.

On the screen was the image of April Dancer, seated before her dressing table and speaking into her fountain pen communicator. From the speaker came both her voice and Randy Kovac's.

April was saying, “Mark Slate is still alive. They haven’t discovered he’s an U.N.C.L.E. agent. They still think he’s merely an Arab thief. He’s locked up at night, and by day is made to work on the launching-pad tower. I’m helping him to escape tonight, but I won’t leave with him. I’ll stick around to see what else I can learn.”

“Got it,” Randy’s voice came from the speaker.

“Also tell Mr. Waverly that Lin Yang is expected here, but no one seems to know exactly when.”

“I already told him that,” Randy said. “I caught it when you were talking to those two men while Mr. Slate’s communicator was open. How’d that happen?”

“It was an accident. Maxim Karsh has Mark’s communicator, but he doesn’t know what it is. I’ll try to get it back before I leave here. “

Maxim Karsh took the pen from his pocket and looked at it. He pushed it in several places, finally twisted the barrel. When a small chromium antenna shot out of its end, he smiled grimly, twisted the barrel again and put the pen away.

“Are you in any danger?” Randy was saying.

April said, “Not physical danger, but I have another problem. The sheik is due to visit my quarters in a few minutes.”

“You get out of there right now!”

Randy shouted jealously.

April said, “Don’t worry. If I have to, I’ll use my lipstick.”

In a relieved tone Randy said, “Oh, the hypo. Sure, give him a shot of chloral hydrate. Okay, I’ll relay your report on to Mr. Waverly.”

On the screen the U.N.C.L.E. agent twisted the barrel of her pen to retract the antenna and dropped it back into her bag, Maxim Karsh flicked a switch and her image faded.

His face grim, he rose and left the lab. Across the hall he glanced into the men’s barracks room, found it empty and stalked up the hall to the mess. All six of his assistants were seated at the long table playing poker.

“You’ll have to break it up,” he snapped. “We have business to do. Sven, go get the sheik. Tell him it’s urgent that I see him immediately.”

“Yes, sir,” Sven said.

Folding his hand, he scooped up the money in front of him and put it in his pocket.

He left by the outside door from the mess hall.

“Fritz, Perez, come with me. Do you have your guns with you?”

The big blond man said, “Yes, sir.”

The Spaniard merely pulled back his coat to show the holster under his arm.

Both men picked up and pocketed the money before them. Karsh

strode back out into the corridor with the two men trailing him. They followed him to the locked door of the room across from his own.

As he slipped a key into the lock, Fritz and Perez drew their guns.

The sheik was just preparing to go to April's quarters when Sven entered the tent. He looked irked when the man delivered the summons from Karsh.

"Can't it wait until morning?" he asked. "What's he want anyway?"

"He didn't say, sir," Sven said stolidly. "He just said it was urgent for you to come right away."

Ranjit looked at his wrist watch, gave an impatient shrug and said, "All right. I'll give him five minutes."

He strode from the tent and Sven followed after him.

FOURTEEN

TRAITORS MUST DIE

When some time had passed without Ranjit Sighn appearing, April Dancer dug her traveling alarm clock from her suitcase and looked at it. She was mildly surprised to see it was ten after nine. Even though she was hardly eager for the sheik's visit, it wasn't very flattering to her vanity to be kept waiting.

Despite what she had told Randy Kovac over her communicator, she had no intention of using her lipstick hypodermic syringe on the sheik. That had been merely to make him stop worrying. The use of such a device would instantly identify her as an U.N.C.L.E. agent, and she expected to retain her guise as a bored American heiress for the rest of her visit.

She felt sure she could fend off any amorous onslaughts by less drastic means.

She therefore had her lipstick tube in her hand for the sole purpose of relining her lips when the sheik parted the door curtains and stepped into the room behind her about five minutes later. She smiled at his reflections in the mirror.

"I thought you had forgotten me and had gone to bed," April told his reflection.

Ranjit smiled back. "Do you take me for an old man? I have looked forward to this moment for weeks."

Moving behind her, he stooped to kiss the back of her neck. His hand shot over her shoulder and plucked the lipstick tube from her grip. His other hand snapped up her bag and he backed away.

"Just in case you have any more devices in your purse," he said angrily.

April swung around to look at him. His gentlemanly veneer was entirely gone. His face had turned a dull red and his eyes blazed with the fury of wounded vanity.

"You have had your fun, Miss U.N.C.L.E. agent," he said.

"Now it is my turn. Did you laugh to yourself when I offered to share a throne with you? Did your sides split with glee?"

April said soberly, "I never laugh at marriage proposals, Ranjit. I might have accepted if you hadn't sold your soul to THRUSH."

He laughed. "You could have had the world, April, in the palm of your hand. But you chose to align yourself with my mortal enemies."

“I was aligned before we ever met,” she said soberly.

“No woman makes a fool of Ranjit Sighn and lives,” he said grimly. “You are going to die, Miss U.N.C.L.E. agent. As slow and painful a death as I can devise. Are you still laughing?”

The sheik’s face had darkened even more. He was rapidly working himself into a maniacal rage. She knew he was on the verge of physically assaulting her when a deep voice from the other side of the curtain said, “Your highness?”

The sheik squared his shoulders.

With an effort he got control of himself. His color faded to its normal olive hue.

“Come in, Orkhim,” the sheik said in a steady voice.

Konya’s father pushed aside the curtains and entered, carrying his rifle at trail.

“Ali said you wished me to report here, your highness,” he said. “Sorry I was so long, but I was in bed.”

“It’s all right,” Ranjit said curtly. “Cover her.”

The chief of the guard showed no surprise whatever. His rifle swung up and centered on the U.N.C.L.E. agent.

“My, you get nervous,” April said sarcastically. “Don’t you think two big strong men could handle a hundred-and-eight-pound girl without a gun?”

“On your feet,” Ranjit said coldly.

The girl rose obediently.

“Put your hands on top of your head.”

When April complied, Ranjit stepped behind her quickly and gave her a thorough shakedown. Her expression became indignant when his searching hands touched, but the cold gaze of Orkhim warned her that he would have no compunction about firing if she made a move. April suffered the search in disdainful silence.

Satisfied that she was carrying no weapons on her person, the sheik told April she could lower her arms. When she did, she had a bobby pin palmed. It wasn’t an ordinary bobby pin. It was of hardened steel and one prong was a picklock, the other a razor-sharp cutting edge.

“Forward march,” Ranjit said, looking harshly at her.

April moved out into the corridor. Orkhim came right behind her, the rifle aimed at the girl’s back. The sheik brought up the rear.

“On through and out the front way,” Ranjit ordered sternly.

As they went past Konya’s room, April got a glimpse of the girl’s startled face peeping through the crack in the curtain’s center over her door.

With astonishment Konya drew back and the crack closed when she saw her father.

The sentry inside the front entrance, and the one immediately outside too, snapped to sharp attention as the group stepped by. Neither showed any more surprise or curiosity than Orkhim had. April Dancer, despite her dangerous situation, couldn't suppress a touch of admiration for the discipline Ranjit had instilled in his troops.

Outdoors Ranjit took the lead. They crossed the moonlit stretch of sand to the building just north of the administration building. There was a large sliding door in its front, wide enough for trucks to pass through. In its center was a regulation-size door for the use of personnel so that the sliding door wouldn't have to be opened.

When Ranjit pulled this door open, light spilled out from indoors.

The building consisted of one huge room crowded with machinery. There were lathes, drill presses, welding equipment. Chipping and polishing machines lay at random around the floor, where workers had laid them down at quitting time. In one corner was a blast furnace, and near it was a heavy piece of equipment towering twelve feet high and measuring twelve feet in width both ways.

A tool bench with numerous small tools hanging on the wall over it and lying on top of it was against the wall between the blast furnace and the large, square machine. Overhead, on rails running the length of the building was a crane with a dangling chain ending in a large steel hook.

Ceiling lights were spaced along the entire length of the center of the room, but only the one immediately over the blast furnace and the cumbersome-looking square piece of equipment was on.

Piles of material were scattered around the floor: stacks of thick steel plates, steel tubing ranging in diameter from water-pipe size to pipes a man could have walked through by stooping, flanges, piles of angle irons and steel rods.

Four men were near the square machine, but only three were upright. In addition to Maxim Karsh there was a large blond man with heavy Teutonic features and a slim, wiry-looking Spaniard.

Another figure, bootless and wearing baggy Arab trousers and a long-sleeved pullover upper garment, lay on his back on the floor April studied the face of the man and was both shocked and relieved to see it was Mark Slate. April nearly failed to recognize him because his hands and face were stained a deep brown.

Slate's ankles were bound together and his wrists were tied in front of him.

Maxim Karsh said with acid courtesy, "Welcome to our little gathering, Miss Dancer. You are, of course, acquainted with your colleague, Mr. Slate."

April said wryly, "Hello, Mark" He gave her an equally wry smile. "Hi, April. What happened?"

“My goof, I think. I had checked my room for bugs, but it didn’t occur to me to recheck it. They must have planted one after I checked.”

Mark said cheerfully, “You can’t win them all.”

“Tie her up,” Karsh abruptly ordered blond Fritz and the Spaniard.

“Just a minute,” Ranjit Sighn said. “I don’t care what you do with the man, but the girl is mine. I have plans of my own for her.”

The squat engineer swung his oversized head toward the sheik. In a furious voice he said, “This is all your fault. You insisted the man was a native and you brought the woman here over my objections. So scuttle your plans. I’m running things from now on.”

“I still rule Mossagbah,” the sheik said coldly. “She shall die as I decree. Slowly, as I watch.”

“You fool!” Karsh lashed out.

“We have no time for personal vengeance. We need information from these people. And we’d better have it before Lin Yang arrives or both of us may die slowly while he watches.”

Ranjit emitted a loud laugh. “Maybe you will, but I won’t. In my own country I am supreme.”

“Why don’t you flip for me?” April asked sardonically. “Odd man out. “

Karsh swung back toward his two henchmen.

“I said tie her up,” he snapped. Then he added in a still vexed but less angry aside to the sheik. “What you do with her after I’m finished, I couldn’t care less. But we’ll do it my way first.”

Apparently this promise satisfied Ranjit, for he made no further objection. April was made to lie on the floor and was bound in the same manner as Slate. Fritz lashed her ankles together while the Spaniard tied her wrists.

He failed to discover the palmed bobby pin.

While April Dancer was being bound, Orkhim said in a low voice to the sheik, “Is not the man the one called Abdul the merchant, your highness?”

“He called himself that,” Ranjit told him. “He is not one of our people. He is a spy named Mark Slate.”

Orkhim decided not to mention that his daughter had been meeting the man clandestinely. It might result in Konya being put to torture too. A parental beating would be sufficient punishment to teach the girl to choose her lovers more carefully.

Maxim Karsh said to the two prisoners, “Observe the large piece of machinery to your left, please.”

Slate and April both turned their heads to look at it. The piece Karsh referred to was the twelve-foot-square monstrosity April had previously noted.

Its flat, cast-iron top, nearly a yard thick, was supported at each corner by eight-inch-thick threaded steel shafts–threaded, apparently so that the top could be lowered or raised to any required height. There was a six-foot gap between the top and the floor of the machine.

A round, convex steel die about feet in diameter was bolted to the underside of the top. A concave die the same size was bolted to the floor directly beneath it.

"Know what the machine is?" Karsh asked coldly.

Mark Slate said, "Looks like a hydraulic press."

"You have been in fabricating plants before, Mr. Slate. This particular press exerts the crushing force of seven hundred and fifty tons. We use it to shape steel plates into the various forms necessary for our project. I will demonstrate."

The stocky man went over to the wall and turned a switch. A set of automatic pumps began to thump. Karsh moved to the workbench, picked out a heavy crowbar and tossed it into the press.

Pointing to a nearby pile of octagonal steel plates about a half inch thick, Karsh said, "Actually the die now in the press is designed to shape those plates into a kind of bowl shape. But they weigh around three hundred pounds each, have first to be heated in the blast furnace and require the assistance of the crane to get them into the press. So the crowbar will serve for demonstration purposes."

He grasped a lever to one side of the machine and pushed it forward.

The floor of the press rose about a foot and stopped.

"Now the lower part of the die will not rise all the way until this lever is pushed all the way you see," Karsh explained. His eyes held a dark, intent gleam. "It rises in proportion to just how far the lever is pushed."

He shoved the lever all the way home. The floor of the press rose, the lower part of the die crushed against the upper with a rumble which made the mammoth machine shake.

When Karsh pulled the lever back toward himself again, the floor of the machine slowly sank to its original position.

Karsh pulled out the crowbar and tossed it to the floor. It had been bent into a semicircle.

"Can you visualize what such force would do to bones and flesh?" he inquired.

April Dancer and Mark Slate merely stared up at him without answering.

"All right, Fritz, Perez," Karsh said crisply. "In with them."

The two men stooped to lift Mark Slate and heaved him into the lower part of the die. A moment later April Dancer next to him.

Maxim Karsh gazed in at them with a gloating smile.

“Comfortable?” he asked.

“I’ve had softer beds,” Slate said. Karsh put his hand on the control lever. “Now if I pushed this forward, you would both be smashed into a curved sheet a half-inch thick. Isn’t that interesting to contemplate?”

Neither April nor Slate said anything. Their real feelings were expertly masked. April wondered if anyone could hear her heart pounding.

“Are you ready?” Karsh asked. Slate said in a steady voice, “You don’t plan to do it just yet, or you wouldn’t be talking so much.”

“No,” Karsh agreed. “You are quite astute, Mr. Slate. I am merely preparing your minds for what is to come eventually. I want you to have a clear picture of what’s in store. But actually you have some time to live yet.”

He turned to the big blond man.

“Bring me the timer, Fritz.”

FIFTEEN

“SPIES DIE AT DAWN”

Fritz went over to where a heavy boxlike device about two feet square lay on the floor next to the wall and lugged it over to the press. He set it down next to the control lever.

An upright steel rod ending in a screw clamp protruded from a slot running the length of the top of the box. On the front of the box were a clock face and a couple of adjustment dials.

Maxim Karsh shifted the position of the device slightly until it was exactly where he wanted then attached the screw clamp to the control lever.

He made some adjustments of the controls beneath the clock face and pushed a button. The box began to tick.

“The control lever is now attached to a timing device,” he explained to the pair in the press. “Every fifteen minutes the lever will move forward just enough to close the press exactly an inch and a half. Since the space between the lower and upper parts of the die is six feet, it will take twelve hours to close completely.”

He glanced at his watch, then favored his prisoners with a sinister smile. “It is now ten. It will be nine hours before you are in acute peril. By seven tomorrow morning there will be only a foot and a half of space left. Shortly after that the crushing will begin. Your last hours will be extremely painful, because the crushing will be so gradual.”

Ranjit Sighn had been watching the entire procedure with a frown on his face. Now he said, “Why drag this out so long, Maxim? Why not set the timer so that it will close in a half hour? I assume your purpose in all this is to force some information out of them. They’ll be more eager to talk if you speed it up.”

Karsh threw him a withering look. “You obviously don’t understand the psychology of interrogation, Ranjit. These people have been conditioned to resist answering questions. If I speeded up the timer as you wish, they would simply lie there and heroically let themselves be crushed to death.

“But contemplating their gradually nearing doom over a matter of hours will be quite a different thing. The terror will build slowly, slowly enough to gradually overcome their mental programming. In the end they’ll be glad to talk.”

The sheik said, “I could accomplish the same thing in a lot less time with a white-hot poker.”

Ignoring him, Karsh turned back to Slate and April. “I think you

both understand what I'm doing. I'm quite sure no physical torture will overcome the brainwashing you've been given by U.N.C.L.E. I'm equally sure you won't be able to withstand the mental strain of watching a horrible death come closer and closer over a period of hours. Don't you agree that the psychology is sound?"

"You're a genius," Slate assured him.

Karsh showed his teeth in a humorless grin. "It is my opinion that if you don't break, you will both lose your minds before you are finally crushed to death. Now all I wish to know is exactly how much you have reported to your headquarters about our project here and what U.N.C.L.E. intends to do about it.

"At any time during the next nine hours that you become willing to talk, I'll be quite willing to listen. The moment I am satisfied you have told all you know, I guarantee you'll be removed from the press."

"And be killed some other way?"

Mark Slate inquired sardonically.

"Not necessarily. We might find a place for you in our organization. You could never return to U.N.C.L.E., of course, after breaking under pressure. It would save a lot of time and trouble if you would agree to talk now, but I don't suppose you're ready yet."

When neither answered, Karsh said, "Obviously you're not. It might speed things up considerably if you will both keep concentrating on what the press will do to your bodies when it has closed sufficiently. Periodically I will return to inquire if you are ready to bargain for your lives. Meantime you win be under the close observation of a guard at all times, so you may give up all hope of somehow working loose from your bonds and escaping from the press. Any questions?"

Neither Slate nor April had any. Karsh said, "Keep in mind that you will not be removed from the press until after you have answered all questions put to you. A mere promise to talk won't be enough, because you might change your minds the moment you are out of danger. So don't wait too long. Once started upward, the movement of the press can't be reversed until it has closed all the way. You would be wise to allow yourself plenty of leeway."

The bottom of the press lurched upward an inch and a half. April felt as though her heart were in her throat.

When the floor rose no farther, she felt slightly better.

"You take first watch, Perez," Karsh said to the wiry Spaniard. "Fritz. You will relieve him at one A.M. I'll appoint other guards for the rest of the night on a three-hour shift basis."

Both men nodded understanding. Perez dragged an empty wooden box to within six feet of the press and sat down facing it.

With a gesture to the sheik, Maxim Karsh moved toward the front

door. Orkhim and the blond Fritz trailed after them.

Outside Ranjit showed April's purse to Karsh and said, "There may be other interesting items aside from the communicator pen and the hypodermic lipstick in this. Come on over to my tent and we'll examine it."

"The lab is closer," Karsh said.

"Let's go there. I want to give a closer look to an item we found on Slate too. He didn't have it the first time we searched him so it may have some significance."

He took a cigarette lighter from his pocket and flicked it alight.

"Looks like an ordinary lighter." Ranjit said.

"The fountain pen looks like an ordinary pen and the lipstick tube like an ordinary lipstick." He turned to Fritz. "You'd better catch some sleep, Fritz, so you can relieve Perez at one."

The blond man said, "Yes, sir," and headed for the administration building.

Orkhim said, "Do you need me anymore, your highness?"

"No," the sheik said. "Go on back to bed."

The bearded Arab didn't go back to bed, though. He made straight for the sheik's tent and entered by the back way.

A light was glowing behind the curtain over the entrance to Konya's room.

Orkhim jerked the curtain aside and found his daughter, fully clothed, kneeling on a prayer mat. She looked up at him in fright.

"You had better pray, spawn of the devil."

He lay down his rifle and slowly untied the heavy ropelike cord around his waist.

"I have done nothing, father," Konya protested. "What do you accuse me of"

"I suppose you didn't know that your fine lover, Abdul the merchant, is really an infidel spy named Mark Slate."

She stared at him in astonishment. "Mark Slate? He is not a Mossagbahan?"

"You know what he is. American? Englishman? What does it matter. You nearly caused me to lose caste by asking the sheik for a dowry for an infidel dog."

"That was your idea, father. I begged you not to."

"Impertinent wench!" Orkhim said. "I will teach you to contradict your own father!"

He doubled the ropelike cord, raised it overhead and brought it down across the girl's shoulders. Burying her face in her hands, she crouched on the prayer mat and uttered no sound as the stinging cord fell across her shoulders and back a dozen times. Her body trembled under the impact of each stroke, though.

Finally Orkhim halted, panting.

She raised her head from her hands and turned her tear-streaked face upward.

"What have they done with him?" she asked.

"You still feel concern for the dog?" he said in outrage. "Do you wish another twelve strokes?"

"No, father," Konya said wearily. "No matter what you believe, he was never my lover. I merely asked what has been done with him."

"He is being taken care of," Orkhim assured her grimly.

"And Miss Dancer? Why was she led away under guard?"

"Ah, that one. She is a spy too.

A comrade of your fine Mark Slate."

"Is the sheik going to have them killed?"

Orkhim shrugged. "His highness submits to the plan of Mr. Karsh, at least for the moment. The infidel Karsh is trying to get information from them. I suppose they will die eventually. That is not my business."

At least they were both still alive, Konya thought thankfully.

Orkhim tied the cord back around his waist and picked up his rifle.

"Have you learned your lesson, girl?" he asked her.

"Yes, father," she said with weary obedience.

"Then may Allah help you mend your ways."

He pushed through the curtain and was gone. Konya rose to her feet, lowered her garment from her shoulders and looked over her shoulder at the reflection of her bare back in the small mirror hanging on the tent wall.

It was criss-crossed with livid welts.

"I will get to America if I have to walk to the ocean and swim there," she resolved under her breath solemnly.

MAXIM KARSH unlocked the laboratory door and switched on the overhead light. Ranjit Sighn followed him in and laid April's purse on the work table.

"I don't see what you expect to accomplish by this nonsense in the machine shop," he said to the engineer. "I could almost tell you what they've reported to their headquarters. They can't know much, because neither one has seen any of the shops until tonight, and according to you, Slate couldn't have gotten to the plans in the safe."

"He's been working on the launching pad tower. He must have drawn some conclusions from that. It's highly improbable that U.N.C.L.E. has any idea of what this project really is, but they certainly know it involves rockets and they're probably trying to make an educated guess. I want to know just what they're thinking and what their counter-plans are."

Karsh took the lighter from his pocket and examined it. He clicked it alight, put it out again and turned it over. After some study he spotted the small catch on the bottom and pushed it. When nothing happened, he turned it rightside up again and pressed the lever again.

Instead of the small flame he expected, a thin blue-white flame spurted out for a distance of six inches. The intense heat it generated startled him into dropping the lighter.

As soon as he released the lever, the flame went out.

Warily retrieving the device, he tried it again. This time he picked up a paper clip with a pair of forceps and directed the flame at its end.

The end of the clip touched by the flame instantly dissolved.

"A cutting torch," Karsh said admiringly. "This will be useful to our agents."

Then he had a sudden thought. Dropping the lighter on the work bench, he said, "Maybe we had better take a look at the room Slate was in." He headed for the door.

The sheik followed him up the hall to the now vacant room. Karsh switched on the light, crossed to the window and bent to examine the bars.

Taking hold of the center one, he pushed outward. The bottom of the bar swung outward and there was a sharp snapping sound as the top broke loose.

Karsh threw the severed bar onto the bunk. Breaking off the other two cut bars, he tossed them there also.

"Miss Dancer must have sneaked over here and slipped him the torch," he said.

He switched off the light and they returned to the lab.

SIXTEEN

"WE ARE READY TO TALK"

The sheik upended April Dancer's purse on the work bench. A variety of items fell out. He picked up the fountain pen, twisted the barrel and looked with interest at the small antenna which popped out. Just as he started to make a comment to Karsh, he caught himself when the squat man put a finger to his lips.

Retracting the antenna, the sheik laid the pen next to the cigarette lighter.

"I'm so unused to a secret gadget like this, Maxim, I completely forgot U.N.C.L.E. headquarters could hear me when it was open," he said apologetically.

Ranjit picked up the lipstick tube and examined it gingerly. After a few moments he discovered the catch which allowed a thin needle to pop from its end. Retracting it again, he laid the tube with the pen and lighter.

Meantime Maxim Karsh had picked up a steel comb. It looked like an ordinary rattail comb, but upon examination he discovered it was made of surgical steel and the tail was as sharp as a stiletto.

"The agent's innocent looking purse contains a whole arsenal," he snapped, tossing it with the other items already examined.

The sheik set aside a handkerchief and a wallet after checking both and deciding neither had any function aside from its original purpose. Then he picked up a flesh-colored earplug.

After studying it for a time, he gave up and handed it to Karsh. The electronics engineer puzzled over it; finally, an enlightened expression formed on his face and he popped it into his ear. Picking up the pen, he turned it on, then held up a solid hand for silence.

Karsh listened for several minutes with a vacuous bored expression on his face, indicating he was hearing nothing. Finally he shrugged, retracted the pen's antenna and removed the earplug.

"Probably a receiver used when they don't want anyone to overhear the reception," he said. "Nobody's broadcasting on the band at the moment, apparently. Our scientists should be able to analyze its principle and build similar gadgets for our own people."

Ranjit picked up April's compact, and put it to his nose as he opened it. He looked into the mirror and ran his finger along the line of his moustache for a second. Then lifting the powder puff, he sniffed at the powder, replaced the puff, and probed various places with his index finger. He failed to find the secret catch which would have

converted the mirror to a transistorized TV screen.

"Just an ordinary compact, I guess," he said, setting it aside.

Maxim Karsh picked up a miniature perfume atomizer. Directing it away from both of them, he released a brief spray.

The only result was a pleasant odor of violets.

Karsh carefully examined the atomizer, but failed to find anything unusual about it.

It didn't occur to him to pull the plunger instead of to push it, which was just as well for him and the sheik.

If Karsh had, the room would have filled with tear gas.

"Just expensive perfume," he said, putting it with the other checked items. "I'm sure she didn't buy this herself."

Only two items remained: a package of chewing gum and one of candy mints. Karsh partially stripped one of the sticks of gum and sniffed at it, then rewrapped it and slid the stick back into its package.

"An American vice," he said disdainfully. "I understand all American women chew this stuff."

If he had chewed a piece, then had carelessly spat it out on the floor, he would have blown up the building.

The sheik was examining the mints. He decided they were nothing but candy and put them with the other items.

It was just as well he didn't try one. Dropped in a glass of water, one of the mints would convert the glass to a smoke pot. Saliva would have had the same effect as water, causing him to spurt smoke like a dragon. Aside from a singed tongue, it wouldn't have hurt him immediately, but it might have brought on a heart attack.

"Lin Yang will want to examine all this," Karsh said. "Let's put everything back in the purse."

When the items were all returned to their original source, Karsh added the fountain pen from his pocket and locked April's bag in the safe

In the machine shop Perez was stationed too close to the press for April and Slate to converse without being overheard. But the others had hardly left when he began to find the box he was seated on uncomfortable.

Rising, he came over to the press and peered in at April and Slate. Satisfied that they couldn't move, he went over to a pile of burlap bags several yards away and lifted a few from the stack.

April took advantage of the opportunity to say in a low voice, "The medallion?"

"Still next to my skin," Mark Slate whispered back. "They apparently didn't remember it. Karsh lifted your lighter, though."

"I have a cutting edge palmed in my hand," April said hopefully.

“I’ll pass it to you as soon as I get my wrists free.”

Then they both lapsed into silence when Perez returned to the box, piled the heavy burlap bags on it for upholstering and reseated himself.

April went to work surreptitiously with the cutting edge of her bobby pin. She had to use it cautiously, because the guard’s gaze was fixed on them steadily from a distance of six feet and she knew any obvious movement of her hands would cause him to investigate.

The floor of the press had lurched upward a second inch and a half, again making her feel more helpless than ever. With enormous concentration and effort she managed to slice entirely through her wrist bonds. She kept her wrists crossed, with the severed rope lying across them.

April couldn’t pass the bobby pin to Mark Slate without being seen. When Perez’s attention had not shifted by the time the floor raised a third time, April said, “Are we allowed to have water?”

“No,” the Spaniard said.

There was nothing to do but lie there and hope something would distract his attention. Nothing did, and time dragged on interminably.

The opportunity finally came at one, when the blond Fritz came to relieve Perez. As the big man entered by the front door, Perez glanced that way, then stood up and stretched.

April’s hand darted sidewise and slipped the bobby pin into Slate’s eager hand. The attention of Perez was still on his approaching colleague when she rearranged the severed rope across her wrists.

Fritz looked with interest at the press. Its base by now had risen a foot and a half.

“They show any sign of breaking?” he asked.

The Spaniard shook his head.

“The girl asked for water a couple of hours ago. When I told her no, she shut up. The man hasn’t said anything at all.”

“Karsh didn’t expect results so early,” Fritz said. “He doesn’t think they’ll break until it starts to get close. I kind of go along with the sheik. If they set that thing so it would only take about a half hour to close all the way, I bet they’d start talking in fifteen minutes.”

“The boss usually knows what he’s doing,” Perez said. “He says they need lots of time to overcome the brainwashing U.N.C.L.E. gave them.”

Fritz seated himself on the burlap-padded wooden box. Perez lifted his hand in a casual good night and left.

Fritz examined the pair in the press. The jaws closed another inch and a half at that moment.

“Either of you feel like talking yet?” Fritz asked.

N either answered for a few moments. Then Slate said in a husky

voice, “We’re not going to get out of this, April. I don’t want to die in this horrible thing.”

Instantly playing along, she made her voice tremble. “I don’t want to either, Mark.” .

“Want to throw in the towel?”

“Yes. Please do something to get us out of here. Anything.”

Slate called to Fritz. “Go get your boss and tell him we’re ready to talk.”

“He’ll be along eventually,” the guard said.

“But we want to talk now.”

“Relax. You’ll feel even more like it when he gets here. I’m not taking my eye off you two until he does.”

He didn’t either. Long after she was sure Mark Slate had cut his wrist bonds, the two U.N.C.L.E. agents had to continue to lie still. With their ankles still bound, it was impossible for either to leap from the press and get to the guard before he had time to draw his gun. If Slate tried to sit up and cut his leg bonds, April knew he would be covered before he could even complete that maneuver.

An hour passed, and now the gap between the lower and upper dies had closed to four feet. April gave up hope of the guard ever relaxing his vigilance enough for Slate to cut their leg bonds. Their only salvation was to lure Fritz into grabbing distance, she decided.

In a low whisper she said, “Mark?”

“Uh-huh,” Mark said.

“I think the rope is beginning to give a little.”

She pitched her voice so low that it was barely audible, but she whispered instead of using her normal tone and merely dropping the volume. She knew a whisper would carry much farther than a low tone.

Slate played along by whispering back, “Shut up. He’ll hear you.”

Fritz rose from his box, came over to the press and stuck his head inside. April had been tensing her arm muscles as though straining against the bonds. Suddenly she relaxed them as though afraid the guard would notice her effort.

The floor of the press lurched upward another inch and a half at that moment, and the blond man nearly fell over backward getting his head out of it.

Looking a bit shamefaced, Fritz gave the control lever a dubious look and leaned in again to examine the rope across April’s wrists.

Finally he decided to crawl into the press to give the rope a tug.

The hard edge of Mark Slate’s palm arced sidewise and thunked solidly against the side of the blond man’s neck. Fritz collapsed on his face.

When he sat erect, Slate’s head nearly touched the top of the press.

With a quick motion he sliced through the rope binding his ankles, then cut the rope around April's.

They had manipulated themselves with effort from the press and Slate was handing April the bobby pin when a hard voice cracked out, "Hold it right there!"

Both slowly turned their heads toward the main entrance to the machine shop. They hadn't heard Maxim Karsh and the sheik come in together. Ranjit was covering them with a forty-five automatic and Karsh held a revolver. Keen disappointment showed on April's and Slate's tired faces.

Hustling forward on his short legs, Karsh said gutturally, "We seem to have timed our visit just right. We came to see if you were yet ready to talk, but you obviously aren't. I'll relieve you of that little item Mr. Slate just handed you, Miss Dancer."

April reluctantly dropped the bobby pin into his outstretched palm.

After examining it, Karsh smiled grimly and dropped it into his shirt pocket. "You don't keep all your tricky little devices in your purse, do you, Miss Dancer? A more thorough personal search of both of you seems in order. But that can wait until we see what you've done to poor Fritz. Ranjit, pull Fritz out of there and see if you can revive him."

The sheik put his gun away, took the blond man by the feet and dragged him from the press. Rolling him onto his back, he slapped Fritz's face until the man sputtered and sat up. He gazed around stupidly.

"Get on your feet, you!" Karsh mapped.

The big man managed to make his feet coordinate, and stood swaying.

"What happened?" he asked thickly. "I was checking the woman's bonds when everything went blank."

"Your mind was blank before you crawled in there," Karsh told him. He turned back to April Dancer and Mark Slate. "Take off your clothes."

"What?" April said, outraged. "Take off your clothes! Right down to your buffs. This instant, or I'll put bullets in both of you!"

SEVENTEEN
THE PRACTICAL JOKE

Although Ranjit Sighn's attitude toward human life was strictly oriental, his attitude toward women had been somewhat reconditioned by four years at Oxford. A few hours earlier he had been sadistically eager to torture April to death, but now he wasn't prepared to let her suffer this type of indignity.

"Just a minute, Maxim," he said coldly.

Karsh looked at him.

"You don't have to be such an utter boor. I'll send for some women to search Miss Dancer in private."

"She's a spy." Karsh was impatient. "Why should we treat her with kid gloves?"

"It's not a matter for discussion," Ranjit said in a definite tone. He drew his gun and held it negligently pointed downward.

Karsh eyed the gun warily. Finally he said, "Well, send for your blasted women then."

The sheik looked at Fritz. "Are you able to walk?"

"I'm all right," the blond man said, rubbing his neck. "Just a little groggy is all."

"You know where Orkhim's tent is? The chief of my guard?"

"Uh-huh."

"Go there, wake him up and tell him I want his wife Adana to come here at once. Then go to my tent and get Agri, the cook. She sleeps in the room just off the kitchen."

"Yes, sir," Fritz said.

He swayed slightly en route to the door, but he made it all right.

As Fritz disappeared, Karsh said sarcastically, "In deference to his highness we won't make you wait while we search Mr. Slate, Miss Dancer. You may turn your back and move in the direction of the press about three feet."

April obediently turned and moved away a couple of paces. Karsh glanced at the sheik to make sure he had both prisoners covered, then put his own gun away.

"All right, Mr. Slate," he said.

"Take your clothes off."

Cocking his eye at April's back, Slate reluctantly complied. Karsh carefully examined each item of clothing as it was handed over. Then he carefully observed the athletic physique of the American agent, even feeling his scalp. He lifted the chain with the Moslem emblem hanging from it from around Slate's neck.

"All right, Slate, You may redress."

As Slate pulled his clothing back on, Karsh studied the emblem. Noticing the small node on its back, he pressed it and unwittingly took the sheik's picture, but since apparently nothing happened, he decided the node was merely an imperfection in the metal.

"Where'd you get this?" he asked Slate gruffly.

"In a shop in Fada."

"They can be bought in any goldsmith's shop," Ranjit offered.

Karsh dropped the emblem into his shirt pocket.

By the time Slate had finished redressing, Fritz was back with the

lantern-jawed cook and another wiry, middle-aged Arab woman. The sheik spoke to both extensively in Arabic, which April didn't understand.

When he finished, April looked at Slate questioningly.

"He's instructing them," Slate said. "He's going to give Agri his gun–she's the tall one with the big jaw–and the two of them are going to take you behind that stack of steel plates over there." He pointed to the pile of octagonal half-inch-thick steel plates.

"You're to strip and the other one, Adana, is to bring the sheik your clothing. He asked Agri if she could use the gun, and she said yes. He also told her to shoot you if you don't behave. So will you do me a favor and cooperate?"

"You save me the trouble of explaining it all again in English," the sheik said approvingly. "Maxim, please cover Mr. Slate so that I can hand Agri my gun."

Karsh drew his gun and the sheik gave his forty-five automatic to Agri. The cook gestured with it for April to precede her behind the pile of steel plates.

When Adana brought out April's clothing, Karsh insisted on examining it himself. Handing Ranjit his gun to cover Mark Slate, he went over each piece with microscopic thoroughness, laying it on the burlap-upholstered box as he finished with it.

Finally satisfied that the clothing contained no implements April might use to again cut herself free, he told Adana in Arabic to go back behind the pile of plates and search the girl's body.

"Don't miss a thing," he said. "I even want every hairpin she is wearing."

In a few minutes Adana returned with a pair of earrings, a charm bracelet and several bobby pins. The bobby pins were all ordinary ones. Karsh examined the charm bracelet and found nothing unusual about it, failing to recognize that the various ornaments hanging from it were all bugging devices. He did grasp the significance of the diamond earrings, however.

"Glass cutters," he explained to the sheik. "The woman carries a machine shop as well as an arsenal around with her."

Stowing all the items in his shirt pocket, he pointed to the pile of clothing on the box.

"Give it back to her," he told Adana. "Then bring her back out here."

When April was led from behind the stack of steel plates, again fully clothed, the sheik dismissed the women. Karsh instructed Slate and April to lie on the floor on their backs. Going over to the work bench, he probed in a drawer and returned with a roll of heavy insulated wire.

“Let’s see if you can cut this,” he said, stooping over Mark Slate first.

Instead of tying knots in the wire, Karsh crimped small metal clamps around it with a pair of pliers. In addition to binding their wrists and ankles, he wrapped wire completely around their bodies and across their forearms between the elbows and wrists, so that their arms were tied down immovably.

It was just three when the pair was shoved abruptly back into the press. The gap had now closed to three and a half feet.

Meantime Karsh had decided that Fritz was still too groggy from the judo chop to resume guard duty. He sent the big blond to get the man named Sven to take over.

Maxim Karsh’s instructions to Sven were explicit. The man was to keep his eyes on Mark Slate and April Dancer at all times, was to hold his gun in his hand and was not to go near the press no matter what happened.

“If either of them do anything to excite your suspicion that they might be working themselves free, shoot first and investigate later,” he concluded. “Understand?”

Sven said he understood.

Karsh went over to the press and looked in. “You people want to be sensible?” he asked. “The only way you’re ever going to get out of there is by answering questions. In another three hours you’ll be wanting to. Why don’t you save yourself all that discomfort and talk now?”

Neither made any reply.

Ranjit came over to the press and his gaze burned at April.

“They’re not going to talk, ever,” he told Karsh. “Why don’t you just push the lever all the way forward?”

“We’ll handle it my way,” Karsh replied. He turned back to the pair in the press. “I’m going to give you plenty of time to make up your minds. I won’t come back until a few minutes before seven. By then the press will have closed to a foot and a half, and you’ll have about fifteen minutes before it closes another inch and a half and clamps you in so that we couldn’t get you out even if we wanted to.

“It won’t start to crush you at that point. You shouldn’t be in even the slightest pain. But you’ll be inextricably wedged in. The next upward movement, fifteen minutes later, will start to break bones. It won’t kill you, though. You’ll have at least another fifteen minutes of agony before the jaws close enough to put you out of your misery.”

“You paint a delightful picture,” Slate said calmly.

“I’m trying to. I want to impress on you that you had better start talking rapidly the moment I walk in next time. Because if you haven’t finished within fifteen minutes, you’ll be beyond help.”

He gestured to Ranjit and the two left together. Sven seated himself on the box, a pistol balanced on his knee, and fixed his gaze on the tightly bound pair lying in the press.

Time stole by. It was easy to measure, because every fifteen minutes the floor of the press lurched upward another inch and a half. April Dancer shuddered every time it happened.

She knew when it was six by counting the number of times the floor of the press moved upward. The upper part of the die was now only a little more than a foot from her face and about six inches from the tips of her breasts.

There was the sound of a door opening and closing; then Sven said in a tone of surprise, "Morning, Sheik. What are you doing up so early?"

Ranjit Sighn's voice said, "I couldn't sleep."

He came over and stared into the press. "Still being nobly silent, are you?"

Neither answered.

"You're not going to talk, are you?" he said. "Maxim is wasting his time, isn't he?"

April said. steadily, "Yes, he's wasting his time."

"I thought so," the sheik said.

He turned away. "Isn't someone supposed to relieve you about now, Sven?"

"Yes, sir. A couple of minute ago. Perez is supposed to come."

"Go rout him out. I'll take over here until he arrives."

"Okay, sir. Thanks a lot."

The sheik waited until the door closed behind Sven, then stooped beside the press and did something to the ticking box on the floor. The press had raised another inch and a half only a couple of minutes before, and April experienced a moment of terror when it suddenly began to rise again. It rose only its usual inch and a half before stopping, however.

Ranjit grinned in at her. "Just a little practical joke, my dear. I set the clock forward fifteen minutes. Maxim won't be back until just before seven, expecting to have time to pull you two out of there if you agree to talk. But you're not going to talk anyway, so I'm leaving a surprise for him. You'll be wedged in too tightly to pull out by the time he gets here."

They heard the front door open and close again. A moment later the face of Perez peered in at them.

"You can take over now, Perez," Ranjit said. "Good-by, April. I'll be back about seven to witness the beginning of the end. Will you scream prettily for me?"

April closed her eyes and made no reply. She saw him walk away

and heard the door open and close.

The next time the press rose, it put them too high above the floor to see their guard when he was seated on the box. April raised her head until it touched the top part of the die and was barely able to see his black hair.

Fifteen minutes passed by. With a rumble the press rose another inch and a half. April's bosom was now within an inch and a half of the top die. Again she raised her head, but this time she couldn't see the guard at all.

She did see something else, though. By now the sun had risen and sunshine was steaming through the machine shop's windows. There were no windows at the rear of the shop, but she caught a momentary flash of sunlight from there as the back door opened and shut.

She wondered if the guard had noticed it, then decided that if he had, he had recognized whoever had entered as someone authorized to be present, because there was no sound from him.

Probably a shop maintenance man coming to get tools ready for the day's work, she thought.

April lay back in suspense and waited for another agonizing fifteen minutes to pass. After a few moments she decided to take one last look at the shop. The next upward movement of the press would raise her just enough to touch her breasts to the top part of the die, and while she still wouldn't be jammed in hopelessly, she wouldn't be able to raise her head for any more scrutiny.

The captured agent from U.N.C.L.E. wanted one last look at the world outside the press, even if all she could see was machinery and stacks of ugly material.

April Dancer raised her head slightly and looked out. Several yards behind Perez, whom she could no longer see, a slim figure crept from behind a pile of steel tubing.

It was Konya and she had a large wrench clutched in her right hand.

At the same moment April Dancer heard the drone of an approaching plane.

EIGHTEEN
IMPORTANT VISITOR

Ranjit Sighn had just finished breakfast when he heard the sound of the plane. He went outside to peer in the direction of the sound. It was a small jet and it was coming in for a landing on the desert sand.

It touched down and taxied toward the oasis. As the sheik strode toward it, Maxim Karsh appeared from the administration building and headed hurriedly that way too.

They simultaneously reached the plane as a set of stairs lowered from the cabin. A lean young Chinese man in a flying suit backed out and held up his hand to assist the other passenger out. The latter was a gray and wizened Chinese with a drooping mandarin mustache resembling two wisps of gray silk. He wore an ankle-length silken robe of jet black with a design of white dragons on it. On his head was a black, buttoned skullcap.

Assisted by the pilot, he came painfully down the steps. When he reached the ground, he straightened his bent figure and peered nearsightedly at Ranjit and Karsh.

"You will be Sheik Ranjit Sighn, I imagine," he said to the sheik in a reedy voice. He turned to the electronics engineer. "And you are Mr. Karsh?"

The sheik merely nodded, Maxim Karsh said nervously, "That's right, sir."

"I am Lin Yang," the old man announced.

"Yes, we've been expecting you sir," Karsh said.

Lin Yang indicated his companion. "This is my pilot and bodyguard, Mr. Hop Foo."

The young man in the flying suit made a graceful bow with his hands clasped together in front of him in the Chinese manner. Karsh bowed with equal formality. The sheik acknowledged the introduction with a bare nod, as befitted royalty when meeting a peasant.

"How is the project coming?" the aged Chinese asked.

The squat engineer said uncomfortably, "Well, sir, except for one slight hitch."

The almond-shaped eyes glittered "Hitch, Mr. Karsh?"

"A couple of U.N.C.L.E. agents managed to infiltrate."

When the old man glared at him, Karsh added hurriedly, "They were both apprehended before they could learn anything of value. Everything is under control. It wasn't my fault. I advised the sheik–"

His voice tapered off at the frigid expression on the old man's face, Lin Yang said in his reedy voice, "Are you or is Sheik Ranjit in charge here, Mr. Karsh?" It wasn't a question; it was an accusation.

"Well, I am," Karsh said uneasily. "But it's the sheik's oasis, and he insisted on bringing the woman here."

"The chief of a project doesn't shift blame, Mr. Karsh," the Chinese said ominously. "Since you are in charge, any slip is your fault."

Karsh gulped."Yes, sir."

"Where are these people?"

"In the machine shop, sir." His voice became placating. "In a way it was an advantage that they came here."

"How's that?"

"We captured a number of their devices, including two of their

communicators. We'll be able to listen in on U.N.C.L.E.'s broadcasts."

"Hmph. Where are these devices?"

"In the laboratory, locked in the safe."

"I will inspect them first before seeing the prisoners," Lin Yang decided. "Give me your arm, Hop Foo."

The younger Chinese offered his arm and the old man leaned on it heavily as he followed Karsh and Ranjit to the administration building. The latter two walked slowly, so that the old man could keep up.

In the lab Karsh knelt before the safe and opened it. He drew out April's purse and a manila envelope.

"The purse is the woman's," he said, emptying it out on the work table. "It contains everything which was in it when we took her, plus the communicator belonging to the man."

He explained each item one at a time. Lin Yang examined each, then dropped it back into the purse as he finished with it. He seemed as interested in the chewing gum as he was in the other items.

"Did you know that chicle was an invention of the Chinese?" he asked Karsh.

"No, sir," the engineer admitted. "It took the Americans to add flavor," the old man said. "But the Chinese chewed it long before Columbus discovered America."

He stripped a piece, popped it into his mouth and offered the pack to Hop Foo. The younger man took a stick also. Lin Yang dropped the rest of the package into one of the voluminous pockets of his gown.

"What is in the envelope?"

"Items obtained from the agents persons," Karsh said, opening it and spilling the contents onto the workbench. "There is nothing of great significance here. This bobby pin is a rather clever device, but hardly sensational. One prong seems to be a picklock, the other a cutting edge.

"These other bobby pins are merely what they look like. The earrings are glass-cutters. The charm bracelet seems to be merely ornamental, however, as does this medallion which the man wore about his neck."

Lin Yang examined each item and dropped it into April's purse when he was finished with it.

"It is wise to keep everything together," he said. "This will be turned over to our central research section for thorough investigation. You've made a valuable catch, Mr. Karsh. It quite makes up for your breach of security. I shall see that you get proper credit at central headquarters."

While Maxim Karsh was beaming with pleasure at this praise, the old man dropped the purse into the other voluminous pocket of his

gown.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, "I wish to see your prisoners."

Konya disappeared from April's field of vision as she crept closer to the press. Then April caught a glimpse of a small dark hand raising the wrench high. It swung downward out of sight and there was a sickening crunch.

An instant later a body hit the floor. Then Konya's frightened face peered in at them.

"Good girl," Mark Slate said.

"See if you can pull us out of this contraption."

The Arab girl grasped Slate's feet, but was unable to budge him. She tried to pull April free with no more success. Because the lower part of the die was shaped like a shallow dish, she lacked the strength to pull them up and over the lip.

For the same reason neither could roll out of the press, because it involved rolling uphill.

"There's a tool bench over against the wall," Slate said. "Get a knife."

"A knife won't cut this wire,"

April objected. "Get a wire cutter, or a bolt cutter, or some tin snips,"

Konya looked confused.

"Just find anything that looks like a pair of scissors," Slate said. "Hurry, Konya–you're a good girl."

Konya's face disappeared and they heard her run toward the tool bench. There was the clatter of tools being tossed around. The noise went on for a while.

"Hurry it up!" Slate called.

"I can't find anything that looks like scissors," Konya called back frantically. Then, in triumph, "Wait. Here's a pair"

The press shuddered and rose slowly another inch and a half. April Dancer felt her bosom push against the top.

The space between the upper and lower dies was now only a foot and a half. Another upward movement would pin them in inextricably.

Konya thrust her head and shoulders into the press. Her right hand gripped a large pair of scissors.

"Those are just plain scissors!"

Slate said. "But never mind. You haven't time to hunt for anything else. Cut!"

The girl started to slide the scissor blades over the wire binding his wrists.

"Not there!" he said; "Cut the wire around my body first."

Konya moved the blades to the wire circling his body and began sawing it back and forth.

"It's not cutting," she said in despair.

"Keep working," Slate said soothingly. "Try both hands."

Konya wriggled farther into the press and got both hands on the scissors. Frantically she sawed back and forth. April was sure that nearly another fifteen minutes had passed before she heard the wire snap.

There wouldn't be time to cut her bonds, she thought despairingly. The press was ready to rise another and fatal inch and a half any second. There wasn't even time to cut Mark's wrist bonds.

"Get out of the press, Konya," Slate said. "Fast!"

He knew there was no more time and didn't want Konya to be caught too, April thought. But as the girl drew her head and shoulders from the press, she realized he had simply wanted her to get out of the way.

Even though his wrists were still bound, Slate's arms were no longer tied immobibly to his sides. Reaching up, he gripped the underside of the upper die and gave a mighty jerk.

His body shot forward feet first and he slid out of the press as though impelled by a spring.

Falling to hands and knees, he bounced erect, balanced precariously on his still-bound legs, made a hopping about-face and moved back to the press. The machine started to rumble as he grasped one of April's feet with his bound hands.

He jerked on the foot mightily, turning his back to the machine as he pulled. April slid from the closing jaws an instant before the floor of the press jolted upward. Slate fell flat on his face with April on top of him.

She lay there for some seconds, hardly believing she was safe, then gently rolled off of him.

Slate pushed himself to his feet and hopped over to the workbench. Konya scurried after him. Supporting himself on the edge of the workbench, he looked over the array of tools there.

"Start pulling open those drawers," he told the girl.

In the second drawer she opened he spotted a tin-snip. "Use that," he said, holding out his wrists.

When she had cut the wire, he took the tin-snips from her and used it on the wire binding his ankles. A few moments later he had cut April free.

April continued to sit on the floor for some moments, rubbing the circulation back into her arms and legs. Slate sat on the box recently occupied by the still unconscious Perez and did the same for himself.

Finally he stood up and pulled April to her feet. Then he looked

down at the floor and glanced around in all directions.

"What happened to Perez's gun?" he asked Konya.

"It slid across the floor over that way," she said, pointing to the stack of octagonal steel plates.

The plates were resting on two two-by-fours, leaving a two-inch space between the bottom one and the floor. Slate bent to peer into the space, then started to reach his hand into it.

"We'd better get out of here," April said. "Karsh said he'd be back a few minutes to seven and it must be past seven now."

At that moment the front door started to open.

NINETEEN
"ESCAPE ME NEVER"

From the corners of his eyes Mark Slate saw the door opening too. He quit groping for the gun and bounced to his feet.

"Run!" he said to April, grabbed Konya's hand and headed for the protection of a nearby steel pipe which had a diameter of about five feet and stretched along the floor for a distance of a dozen feet.

April darted after them. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw four men entering the door. Maxim Karsh and Ranjit Sighn were first. Behind them came an ancient Chinese leaning on the arm of a younger Chinese man.

Slate and Konya reached the near end of the pipe and ducked inside as guns came out and were leveled. She wasn't going to make it in time, April thought, tensing her body in anticipation of the impact of bullets as she made a desperate dive for the pipe.

Only a single shot sounded, and it went wild.

April was sliding along the inside of the pipe on her stomach by then, and hadn't seen what caused the delay in effective fire. The younger Chinese had jumped in front of Ranjit Sighn, blocking his aim, then had fired so quickly his bullet went high.

The older man, suddenly losing the support of the younger's arm, had floundered against Maxim Karsh and had thrown his arms around him in a desperate attempt to regain balance. Instead he had knocked the squat man off balance too, and they both tumbled to the floor tangled together.

Slate dragged Konya from the other end of the pipe and headed for the protection of a drill press. Scrambling to her feet, April scurried after them.

She saw the sheik running their way with his gun leveled. She ducked behind the drill press. Karsh, looking annoyed, was just getting to his feet.

Ranjit fired, but by then the three were running for the cover of a

pile of steel rods, keeping the drill press between them and their pursuers. From there they darted behind an enormous steel lathe, and finally across an open space toward the rear door.

Fortunately the door opened outward. Mark Slate, still dragging Konya by the hand, hit it with his shoulder and lifted the latch at the same time. As April sped through the door behind them, bullets smacked into the door frame on either side.

Hand in hand, Slate and Konya headed for the rear of the administration building at a dead run, with April right behind them. An Arab sentry between the two buildings, but at the front end of them, turned to stare their way.

Slate and Konya disappeared around the corner of the administration building. Another two bullets slammed into the edge of the building as April rounded the corner after them.

Mark Slate had dropped to hands and knees and was frantically digging in the sand. Konya had flattened herself against the building next to the rear door. Gasping for breath, April flattened herself next Konya.

Slate's hand dosed over the buried U.N.C.L.E. gun and brought it up just as Maxim Karsh raced around the corner. Karsh screeched as he came to a halt. His finger was whitening on the gun trigger when the U.N.C.L.E. gun flashed.

The squat engineer was blasted over on his back and lay still.

Slate peered around the corner, then hurriedly drew back as three shots winged his way.

"Ranjit and a couple of Arab guards," he said. "Is that door unlocked?"

April, who had already tried it, shook her head.

Slate blew it open with his U.N.C.L.E. gun and led the way inside.

Slamming the door behind them, he said rapidly "It's just about time to start work, so the building should be empty. We'll make a break from the other end and try to get to the corral before they realize what we're doing. Let's go."

The building wasn't quite empty, though. Fritz and Sven, because of their night guard duty, were sleeping in, and had been awakened by the shots. In pajamas and with guns in their hands, they both suddenly appeared from the barracks room.

The U.N.C.L.E. gun flashed twice and both men dropped.

Hardly slowing stride, Slate rushed by the prone bodies with Konya scurrying after him and April Dancer bringing up the rear. As she passed the two fallen men, April slowed enough to scoop up both their guns.

At the far end of the hall Mark Slate flung open the mess hall door, gave the room a sweeping glance, then ran across to the door leading

outside when he saw the room was empty. He paused to peer through the curtains of the door's upper pane.

Konya and April crouched on their knees at the window alongside the door in order to peer out.

Led by Orkhim, a half dozen Arab guards with rifles were running their way from the oasis. From the other direction three THRUSH technicians with drawn pistols were moving in.

"Don't shoot my father!" Konya, said pleadingly.

Slate looked at her, then glanced toward the windows at the side of the room toward the machine shop. Following his gaze, April saw Ranjit and two Arab guards between the two buildings, moving cautiously toward the rear of the administration building.

"Looks like we're hemmed in," Slate said grimly. "We'd never shoot our way through that mob."

April hefted the two guns she had picked up. "We have three guns."

Slate cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Two-gun April from the wild west. We'd still never make it."

"You won't shoot my father, will you?" Konya said.

Slate started to give her an irritated look when the building was rocked by a nearby explosion so loud, it sounded as though a bomb had been dropped from an airplane. All three instinctively fell flat.

Mark Slate was first to his feet again, and April was only a micro-second behind him.

Konya was still cowering on the floor when they reached the side windows.

The roof of the machine shop they had just left had collapsed and the building was enveloped in flames.

A second terrific explosion sounded and the building beyond the machine shop spurted flames skyward.

Ranjit and the two Arab guards between the administration building and the machine shop halted their stealthy advance toward the rear of the building and rushed toward the burning machine shop.

The three THRUSH technicians ran toward the second burning building.

Third and fourth explosions sounded from the other direction. Slate and April ran across the room to stare out the windows on that side.

The remaining two large buildings were enveloped in flames.

This turn of events was too much for Orkhim and the other riflemen who had come from the oasis. They had halted uncertainly at the first two explosions. Now they turned tail and headed back for the oasis at a dead run.

"Let's go," Slate said.

Jerking open the door, he stooped to pull Konya to her feet by the hand and ran outside. April was right behind them.

Slate started toward the corral on the oasis, then spotted the plane the two Chinese had arrived in and changed direction.

It was a fifty-yard run, and April was sure they must have broken some kind of track record. When they reached the plane, Slate yelled for the girls to climb inside, and ran beneath the wing to kick away the chocks blocking the wheels.

Konya merely stood there gasping for breath. April grabbed her shoulder, pushed the Arab girl up the steps leading to the cabin and crowded after her.

There were several seats in the cabin. Konya was in such a daze from all the excitement and exertion; she simply stood there panting until April unceremoniously shoved her into a seat. April herself dropped into the one immediately behind the pilot's seat, then tossed her two guns onto the seat across the aisle from her.

Through the front cowling April could see that all four of the larger buildings were total losses. As she watched, the walls of the administration building burst outward and flames shot more than twenty feet into the air.

She spotted the running figure of Ranjit Sighn. Apparently he had given up hope of saving any of the buildings and was making a last desperate effort to rescue something from the wreckage, because he was running toward the launching pad tower.

He was nearly there when a mushroom of smoke and flame erupted from the base of the tower. As the steel-grid edifice began to topple, Ranjit turned and ran the other way.

He never made it. April closed her eyes and clenched her fists an instant before the figure of the running sheik was blotted out by the geyser of sand that spurted upward as the huge tower crashed to the ground directly on top of him.

Mark Slate came through the cabin door, slid into the pilot's seat and examined the instrument panel.

Tentatively he pushed a couple of buttons. The jet engine started to fire, then died.

"Do you know how to fly this thing?" April asked.

"I have a pilot's license," he said. "I've never flown a jet."

"Oh, fine," April said, starting to rise from her seat. Let's head for the corral and kidnap some camels."

"Relax," Slate told her. "I know the basic idea. I'll work it out."

April glanced toward the burning buildings and spotted two figures racing their way.

"You'd better figure it out fast," she said dryly. "Or at least figure out how to raise the steps before we're invaded."

Slate glanced toward the running figures. The one in the lead was the ancient Chinese who had fallen against Maxim Karsh in the machine shop.

Close behind him was the young Chinese pilot.

The old man was running with remarkable agility for one who shortly before had required assistance to walk.

"I think this raises the steps," Slate said, pushing a button.

The cabin lights went on.

Slate abandoned trying to raise the steps and fired the engine again. This time it caught. He knew that without a few seconds of warmup they would probably crash on takeoff, though, and the two approaching Chinese were nearly to the plane.

He drew his U.N.C.L.E. gun as the old man in the mandarin costume started up the steps.

Then his jaw dropped. He stared. His hand went to his forehead.

As he came up the steps, the elderly Chinese tucked his thumb under his chin and peeled his whole face upward.

The rubber mask came off to expose the serenely smiling face of Napoleon Solo.

Behind him the younger man had ripped off a rubber mask too. It was Illya Kuryakin.

"You people occupied everyone nicely while Illya and I ran around and tossed plastique explosives," Solo said. "I'm afraid we used up all your chewing gum, April, but here's the rest of your stuff."

He tossed her purse to her, then sank into the seat next to her.

Illya Kuryakin jerked his thumb in the direction of the seats behind the pilot's seat.

"Move to the back of the bus, boy," he said. "And let an expert take over."

One week later Mark Slate, April, Mr. Waverly, Randy and Konya had lunch together at a New York restaurant. Konya was smartly attired in a Fifth Avenue dress selected by April and had her dark hair done in an attractive modish upsweep.

"I can hardly believe my freedom here," she said to Alexander Waverly. "And my good luck in being accepted by the U.N.C.L.E. academy. It is all so wonderful. Do you think I can pass all those courses?"

"I'm sure you can," Waverly said in his usual formal tone. "Your I.Q. tested well above our minimum requirements, and they are quite high."

"It'll be a breeze," Randy told her. "I could pass most of the tests myself, and I'm just an on-the-job trainee."

"There's one test you couldn't pass," Slate said dryly. "U.N.C.L.E.

agents are supposed to be modest."

Randy grinned at him, unabashed.

"You will be assigned to Cairo headquarters, of course, when you finish your training," Waverly said to Konya. "With your background, you'll be more valuable there than anywhere else."

The girl threw a wistful look at Mark Slate.

Catching it, Alexander Waverly smiled dourly.

"I will occasionally give Mr. Slate a middle-east assignment," he assured the girl.

April Dancer had seen the wistful look too.

She gave Alexander Waverly a frown of disapproval.